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The Life Cycle of Farm Women in Tokugawa Japan

Anne Walthall

Among the peasantry of Japan one finds the women who have the most freedom and independence. . . . The Japanese peasant woman, when she marries, works side by side with her husband, finds life full of interest outside of the simple household work, and as she grows older, her face shows more individuality, more pleasure in life, less suffering and disappointment, than that of her wealthier and less hard-working sister.

ALICE MABEL BACON

Peasant women in Tokugawa Japan grew up, married, gave birth, and died in generally obscure circumstances. Little is known of them as individuals, and the emotional content of their lives remains largely unrecorded. The accounts women themselves left molder in family archives, and aggregate data can scarcely provide insights into the nature of their childhood experiences, their relations with their husbands and their husband’s family, and their later years. It is only by piecing together a variety of different sources that we can begin to perceive, in patchwork, a pattern to these women’s lives.

One source is village records, such as the population registers (shōmon aratamecho), petitions, passports (mura-okuri issatsu), promissory notes for brides, and deeds of inheritance, which, although their main purpose was to promote social stability, tell us something about women’s experiences. In addition, agricultural handbooks describe the kinds of work women performed, and precepts for women tell us what they were expected to do. Early-nineteenth-century family histories and diaries kept by wealthy peasant entrepreneurs are a

third, more vivid source for the historian interested in exploring the fabric of Japanese women’s lives. Those kept by Suzuki Bokushi from the snow country of Echigo, by the Sekiguchi family from Namamugi village near Yokohama, and by Suzuki Heikurō from a village in the Tama region that is now part of greater Tokyo are particularly rich sources, and I have used them extensively for this chapter.

The major conclusion we can draw from these materials is that social relationships between the sexes varied much more than historians have previously thought possible. Opportunities for women, like those for men, were largely a function of economic class and social status: the lives of impoverished peasant women bore little resemblance to those of their wealthy farm neighbors, and a rich peasant’s wife, sister, or daughter experienced a much more agreeable existence than many a male from a poor peasant family.

The picture is further complicated by regional differences that produced a variety of social arrangements. In some regions but not in others, for example, women might serve as household heads, even though the designated roles for women presumably required that daughters obey their fathers, wives their husbands, and mothers their sons. Historians trying to make sense of this diversity might well be tempted to agree with one major figure in the preparation of the late-nineteenth-century Meiji Civil Code, who suggested that the customs of farmers were not really customs at all.2 Put another way, it is impossible to establish a single portrait of rural women. The view that emerges from available sources suggests that, like all people who shape their lives around the rhythms of agricultural cycle, Japanese peasants were accustomed to responding flexibly to the vagaries of their existence. They had to deal with what David W. Plath had defined as the life-course problem—that is, “how to adapt one’s personal trajectory and tempo of biographical events” to the preindustrial order.3 Deciding when and whom to marry, for example, was not simply a function of tradition but necessitated real choices on the part of the woman and her family. Although every woman was a daughter, and almost all became wives, not all became mothers. For the women involved, each stage in their lives thus became increasingly problematical, and for historians today each step opens up more opportunities for debate and controversy: indeed, was there a typical or “normal” pattern of existence?


DAUGHTERS

Parents appear to have made few distinctions between boys and girls in infancy. Soon after birth both sexes observed the rites of passage through which they became members of their communities. Parents marking the arrival of a child had a variety of ceremonies from which to choose. Those that they deemed important seem to have varied more according to their economic standing, the time period, the region, and the life course of the other family members than to the sex of the newborn child.

In the case of wealthy families, the ceremonies marking the birth of a child of either sex were often elaborate. Thus, two weeks after Fute was born in 1783 to the Nomura family from Hitachi province, her grandparents held a banquet for 120 people to celebrate her birth. To announce the birth of Ai in 1835, the Sekiguchi family from Namamugi waited only seven days but also celebrated rather lavishly, sending trays containing sake, pickles, radishes, mushrooms, and fish to everyone in the neighborhood. A month later they took their newborn daughter to the family shrine, paid a fee of two hundred mon, and distributed balls of red beans and rice to the neighbors. The poor could hardly afford such elaborate celebrations for any of their children.

Gender distinctions became more apparent in naming customs, gift giving, and ritual observances as infants grew into young children. Names distinguished girls from boys soon after they were born: while Ai’s brothers were given names derived from ancient military terms, the character Ai means “beloved.” Her first bath was not an important event, whereas her older brother’s was. At Ai’s first New Year, thirty-three neighbors and five relatives sent money, and her maternal grandparents sent her a doll; her parents reciprocated with rice cakes and held a banquet for family members. More people attended her brother’s first New Year, however, and fancier presents were sent to the neighbors. At their third birthday, most girls were allowed to receive a new hairdo; Ai’s was ignored because it conflicted with her brother’s fifth birthday. For her seventh birthday, which marked her formal introduction into her peer group, she donned the Japanese woman’s wide sash (obi), and her family held a party for children in the neighborhood, giving them all balls of red beans and rice. Yet these festive foods were presented to the neighbors at all of her brother’s birthdays, and his fifth birthday was marked with an elaborate celebration with his peers.5

Although boys may have received more attention at the major milestones of their early childhood, the upbringing of both sexes in their early years, as far as we can tell, was otherwise fairly equal. The way parents indulged infant boys and girls worried educators. According to Yamana Bunsei, a peasant from Kii province, “husband and wife raise the child. During the day it receives its father’s caresses and affection, at night it enjoys its mother’s milk.” Like most writers on the subject of childrearing, Yamana saw no need to differentiate between young boys and girls. But parents had to be careful. Precepts still in the possession of the Matsushita family in the Ina valley warned, “If the parents indulge in their love for their children and allow them to grow up as they please without discipline, when the children reach adulthood they will hate to work, they will delight only in evil things... they will run away, and they will end their lives as outlaws.” Believing that children are innately good but have to be molded by their environment into social beings, other writers stressed the importance of observational learning and good role models. Although the evidence is inconclusive, it appears that the first five years of any child’s life were made as pleasant as family circumstances permitted. When the child showed sufficient maturity, he or she was assigned age- and gender-appropriate tasks and treated more strictly.

A host of factors—geographical location, economic opportunity, and historical change—made a difference in how a girl became a young woman. Yet girls everywhere were expected to be obedient and gentle, discreet in speech, clean and tidy, and industrious in women’s tasks. Their education in practical skills was acquired in needle shops (ohariya) and girls’ rooms (musume yado), which paralleled young men’s associations and like them were established village by village. Attendance was compulsory (though perhaps not for the rich and prestigious) from age fourteen to marriage, and in some regions a girl was not considered a respectable, marriageable adult until she had been a member for several years. During the day she would help with the work at home, but at night she would go to the musume yado, where she would learn handicrafts, talk with other girls and the older women... to visit a shrine and then to neighbors and relatives; see Hida Yukio and Mita Sayuri, “Jökyûseiki zenpan Edo kinkô nòson ni ocheru joshi kyûoku no ichi kenkyû,” Yokohama kokuritsu daiisuku kyûoku kiyô, no. 21 (November 1981): 72-77.


who supervised work and play, and perhaps sleep, although some historians have argued that the chief purpose was to provide a place for common study. Needle shops, which were open only during the winter, likewise concentrated on the skills required for everyday life. A farm wife skilled at sewing and other crafts became the “little mother” to her students, teaching them sewing and perhaps flower arranging, tea ceremony, gift wrapping, and music. In the girls’ rooms and needle shops, poorer farm women learned from other women, an opportunity unavailable to women from wealthier farm households who were discouraged from mingling promiscuously with ordinary peasants.

In some areas of Japan by the early nineteenth century, families might invest enough money in their daughters’ educations to allow them to attend temple schools, or terakoya. Although Ronald P. Dore estimated that about 43 percent of all boys and 10 percent of all girls attended school, there was considerable regional variation: the impoverished Tōhoku region educated far fewer children of either sex than the more flourishing areas around Edo and Kyoto. It is difficult to determine how many girls had schooling; one rural school near Okayama, for example, as encouragement to female students, kept no records of their attendance, since the teachers assumed that girls would be embarrassed to have their names called in public. Nevertheless, we can assume that most girls who attended school came from middle-level peasant families and above because schooling was expensive: costs included lunch, clothing, shoes, and rainwear, in addition to the loss of a valuable labor source.

Girls studied for two to five years—not enough time to learn difficult Chinese characters, even had they been thought capable of it, but long enough to absorb moral instruction. Popular texts, like Jokun (Precepts for women), were based on Chinese classics that taught the virtue of obedience. Transposed into the Japanese syllabary and supplemented with biographies of exemplary women, these texts provided practice in reading and writing that enforced the code of behavior thought appropriate for women by their authors, male members of the ruling class. Miscellaneous Lessons on Filial Piety, a textbook written by Sekiguchi Tōemon, a wealthy rural entrepreneur from Namamugi, admonished girls to “do their housework, look after their in-laws and their husbands, and teach their children accounting, reading, etiquette, and handwriting.” Tōemon taught whoever was willing to come to his house, including the daughters of his tenants. In the early Meiji period, such informal opportunities for schooling disappeared, and the public institutions that replaced them may have made education less available to the daughters of the poor. In villages where the male elite was uninterested in improving public morals, poor women remained illiterate.

Wealthy families, however, devoted a surprising amount of income and energy to the upbringing of their daughters. The Suzuki family from Echigo demanded much more than the simple skills learned by ordinary peasants. Taka, born in 1777, went to a temple school to learn penmanship at age eight and, together with her niece Shin, then studied the Chinese classics, selections of Chinese poetry, and correspondence. Her sister Fuji, like some other wealthy rural women, became an accomplished poet, leaving over a thousand poems at her death. But it was her brother Bokushi’s granddaughter, Suwa, who seems to have been the most diligently schooled. Suzuki Bokushi served as his granddaughter’s private tutor, teaching her everything he taught his son. She began to read and write by the age of seven, and she was already helping to record transactions in the family pawnshop when she was ten years old. By his own account, Bokushi believed in teaching his children to value practical learning, especially the techniques of accounting, and not to waste their time studying the classics. In the case of his granddaughter, however, he gave instruction in painting and poetry writing as well. From a young age, Suwa was also expected to perform certain public roles, representing the family at important ceremonial occasions. At twelve she and her cousin Tsune spent several days kneeling while a priest read from esoteric Pure Land texts. At sixteen she represented her family at the funeral of her great-grandfather in a nearby village.

11. Shibata Hajime, Kinsei gendai no okumen to shō (Shinseisha, 1966), 200–201. See also Shibata Hajime, “Nomin iaihi to nōson bunka no denro,” in Chihō bunka no denro to sōzō, et al. Chihōshiki kenkyū kyōgikai (Yūzankaku, 1976), 191–92. This school was established by the poor peasants (kōmashya kushu) in 1782 to improve public morals through study by men and women alike.
12. Shiga, Nihon joshi kyōkushi, 258–88. In Tochigi prefecture, Usui Sei had 120 to 130 students, both boys and girls. She taught the boys reading and the girls reading, sewing, and painting.
14. Suzuki Bokushi no shirō shi (Niigata: Niigata-ken Kyōikuinkai, 1961), 7, 26, 46, 207. Bokushi is famous for his ethnographic description of life in the snow country, orig-
In the villages near Edo, wealthy peasant entrepreneurs bent on acquiring the best and most expensive education available for their daughters had them become servants in the homes of daimyō and hatamoto (high-ranking retainers in the shōgun). Here, at no small cost to their families, they learned feminine deportment: good posture and graceful movement, elegant and deferential language, appropriate dress and bodily care, and techniques of managing a household. They might even move from one post to another to learn different forms of etiquette. Although the girls received nominal wages, their parents had to provide all of their daily necessities, bedding, pillows, mirrors, shoes, pocket money, and clothing—three changes a year—as well as presents and fees for the go-betweens and the employers. In 1812, the Sekiguchi family had three daughters in service. The average cost per daughter was about 5 to 6 percent of the family’s household budget, not including emergency expenses, preparations made before the girls went into service, or presents upon entering and leaving a household. According to a guide to service in samurai households, the costs were evidently worth it, for “if a girl remains with her parents she will never know how to deal with misery. If she has not suffered, she will not make a good bride, so girls apprentice themselves to learn self-discipline.” Today the pampered daughters of the upper middle class still go to finishing schools—the most prestigious women’s colleges.

For the daughters of wealthy peasants who lived too far from samurai households and the educational opportunities they offered, costly pilgrimages functioned more or less as finishing schools. The pilgrimage both strengthened faith and provided an occasion for sightseeing and observation; it was a learning experience that took young women outside their home communities and forced them to interact with strangers. Taken usually a year or so before marriage, the pilgrimage made it possible for teen-agers to travel with their friends and female relatives largely apart from male society, except for one companion-escort. Suzuki Toyo, mother of Taka and Fuji, never forgot her pilgrimage to the Ise shrine in 1752 when she was fourteen, and even at seventy she could recite the names of every inn she stayed at en route. All of her daughter-in-law’s published in 1835; see Suzuki Bokushi, Snow Country Tales: Life in the Other Japan, trans. Jeffrey Hunter with Rose Lesser (Tokyo: John Weatherhill, 1986).

15. The Sekiguchi family spent much less than Shibue Iō’s father, who paid four hundred ryō a year to keep her in service at the Tōdō mansion; see Edwin McClellan, Woman in the Crested Kimono: The Life of Shibue Iō and Her Family, Drawn From Mori Ōgai’s “Shibue Chōrai” (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), 23.


17. Suzuki Bokushi no shiryou shū, 12–13, 199.
19. Shinjō Tsunezō, Shoji sanshi no shakai keizai shiteki kenkyū (Hanawa Shōbo, 1964), 988–89; Shinjō Tsunezō, Shoji to kōtsu (Shibundō, 1960), 158. The nuke mairi was a pilgrimage taken without permission of one’s parents or other people in positions of authority.
20. Sata was wearing a crepe-lined under-kimono, the collar of which had large doubles, a handwoven wadded silk over-kimono, a jeweled pongee silk jacket with an under-collar of black satin, and a handwoven satin obi faced with crepe. She carried a small crepe wrapper for holding tissue paper and in her hair were two ornamental hairpins, one silver and one Korean; see Kanagawa-ken kikaku chōsabu kenshi henshūshitsu, Kanagawa kenshi shiryōhen 7: Kinsei, vol. 4 (Yokohama: Zaidan Hōjin Kanagawa-ken Kōsaikai, 1975), 780.
began to leave their homes and villages in the latter half of the Tokugawa period, they went to work as indentured servants (hōkōmin). Studies of polder villages in central Japan show that three-fourths of the daughters of tenants in one village left home in search of work, and nearly two-thirds from another were sent into service outside the village at least once in their lifetimes.  

Sending a young unmarried girl out to work for the sake of the rest of the family could have dire consequences. Parents worried that their daughter might be mistreated or sold into prostitution. Worse yet, once freed from her parents’ supervision she might run away to the city, causing them embarrassment and financial hardship. Many girls left their families at the age of twelve to serve strangers, receiving as payment two changes of clothing and yearly salaries remitted to their fathers in amounts ranging from one to two and a half yō—half the cost or less of a pilgrimage to Ise. Children even younger could often find work as nursemaids.  

Factors such as the spread of indentured servitude (which took girls out of the village), the growing emphasis on education, and the opportunity to go on pilgrimages conceivably influenced sexual practices preceding marriage, the choice of marriage partner, and the age of marriage, perhaps reducing the community’s ability to control its women through the old custom of yobai (night visits). Here, too, the evidence is contradictory or varies according to a family’s socioeconomic standing. There is also a discrepancy between official samurai ideology and actual peasant behavior.  

Official samurai teachings frowned on premarital sexual promiscuity. The “Instructions for Women” sent to peasant villages by the lord of Matsumoto in 1793 announced that “after a girl is ten, she should not mix with boys. After she is twelve or thirteen, she should not come near men. It is best to be modest and discreet.” Yet evidence gathered by folklorists and historians, while sketchy and not altogether in agreement, suggests that peasants generally ignored these precepts.  

Several historians believe that premarital sex among village girls and boys was common. In Louis Frederic’s words, “Boys and girls could have amorous intrigues as it suited them and these did not necessarily lead to marriage.” Meiji ethnographer Yanagita Kunio further argued that the young men’s associations of each village, and not parents, actually controlled the selection of marriage partners by means of night visits. The boys would spend evenings with members of the girls’ groups, working, singing, and chatting before pairing off and sleeping together. They would then tell their parents whom they had chosen as a marriage partner.  

Evidence from other areas, however, suggests that sexual relations were permitted only after the couple became engaged. In the mountains of Shikoku, young men visited girls in villages as far distant as twenty to thirty kilometers, where they helped in paper making and tried to ingratiate themselves with the girls’ families, but they were watched so closely that they seldom managed to become intimate. In other areas, both boys and girls were criticized only if they had sex with more than one partner.

22. In 1808 the peasant Magohachi, from a village near Hachiōji, sued to have his daughter returned to him. He claimed to have been assured by middlemen that she was working as a maid for the lord of Owari. Only when he fell ill and wanted to see her did he discover that she had been sold to a brothel in Shin Yoshawara. See Osada Kanako, “Kimeki nōson jōsei no ichidamanner,” Tama no oyumi, no. 27 (November 1984): 35. Examples of women who ran away without fulfilling their contracts may be found in Oyuchi Yōjirō, “Gejō hōkō to nōsagyou: kōshi nikki yori mita,” ibid., 11; and Sakurai Masanobu, ed., Shin Nihon jōsei-shi (Yūho Shoten, 1979), 255–56. In 1859, destitute parents from a village near Osaka agreed to sell their daughter Hisa, then eighteen, for seventy yō (formally called an adoption) and promised not to object to anything her new family might require of her; see Dan Fenno Henderson, Village “Contracts” in Tokugawa Japan (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), 149–59.  

26. Louis Frederic, Daily Life in Japan at the Time of the Samurai, 1165–1603 (New York: Praeger, 1972), 58. Richard Varner, “The Organized Peasant: The Wakamonogumi in the Edo Period,” Monumenta Nipponica 32, no. 4 (1978): 480, asserts that a man had to have many short-term sexual encounters before he could think of marriage. Thomas Elia Jones found that in Namase in Ibaraki prefecture not more than 2 percent of the unmarried young women were virgins, and all married women had had sexual relations before marriage; quoted in Robert J. Smith, “Making Village Women into ‘Good Wives and Wise Mothers’ in Prewar Japan,” Journal of Family History 8, no. 3 (1983): 74. In the villages of Higashi Matsuyama in Saitama prefecture, the sons and daughters of ordinary peasants were comparatively free in their sexual experiences, and in some villages marriage had the meaning of settling down; see Shishi Hensanka, Higashi Matsuyama-shi no rekishhi, vol. 2 (Saitama-ken, Higashi Matsuyama-shi: Higashi Matsuyama-shi, 1985), 366.  
27. Hirabayama Kazuhiko, “Seinen-dan to sonraku bunka,” in Chōhō bunka no denshi to sōsho, ed. Chihōshicho kenkyū kōgyōkai (Yazanankaku, 1976), 246–49. That this view is still prevalent may be seen in an article by Ueno Chizuko, “Genesis of the Urban Housewife,” Japan Quarterly 34, no. 2 (April–June 1987): 135. It has been said that in some villages, these night visits were made to widows or women whose husbands were away from home.  
Diverse courtship practices make it difficult to determine in specific cases the exact age of marriage. In areas where night visits were customary, the line between the role of daughter and the role of wife became blurred. This is also true in cases where married daughters of the poor continued to work for their natal families until their mid to late twenties or even older before moving to their husband’s home. In some instances, marriages were not officially registered until after a trial period of a year had elapsed.

For all these reasons, one cannot say with certainty what the average age of marriage was for couples in preindustrial Japan. Although Carl Mosk and Saito Osamu think that women married young, Hayami Akira has suggested that, when daughters of tenant farmers migrated in search of work, they tended to marry late. Miyashita’s study of villages near Osaka showed that the wealthier the family was, the earlier their womenfolk married. In general, then, a woman’s age at marriage, like so many other aspects of her life, appears to have been determined by the socioeconomic standing of her family.

**WIVES AND DAUGHTERS-IN-LAW**

Under ordinary circumstances, marriage marked the major metamorphosis in a woman’s life. Not all women had either the desire or the opportunity for married life, however. For the daughters of wealthy peasants, spinsterhood or divorce made it possible to live for oneself, not for others. For the poor, however, life without a husband was a matter not of choice but of necessity. In one household in the Hino region in the early 1800s, a mature unmarried woman continued to live in her natal home with her married brother (the family heir) because her father demanded her labor. Constrained by the family’s need for income, such women missed their chance for a family of their own.

Demographers debate the extent to which women married outside their natal village and the age difference between husband and wife. Here again, historical processes, regional variation, and diverse economic circumstances produced a number of peasant strategies for adapting personal trajectories to the rhythm of the preindustrial agricultural order. Regarding the first question, Richard Varner has argued that “spouse selection was restricted to within the village, for the peasants were generally opposed to marriages contracted with outsiders.” If the young men’s associations were to be strong, they had to enforce endogamy. In contrast, Cornwell, in contrast, has shown that in one area in central Japan, most women went as brides to villages other than their own. Mori Yasuhide’s study of a village near Edo and Miyashita Michiko’s study of a village near Osaka demonstrate that the circle from which marriage partners were chosen depended on the family’s economic interests: wealthy and influential peasants sought partners from far away, while poor peasants made more informal connections within the village, connections perhaps arising out of the nights when the young men’s associations and the girls’ room were allowed to merge.

Age differences between husband and wife also vary considerably. Near Osaka the difference was nearly ten years, a finding that supports the arguments of Cornwell, among others. In contrast, the average age difference between husband and wife in one village near Edo was five years, and in the villages of Sagamihara it was almost nil. Among the poor at the end of the Tokugawa period were couples where the wife was older.

If the ideal marriage did not necessarily link couples who were close in age, it did link families of equal status and class. Detailed studies of marriage patterns show that rich married rich, poor married poor, and international, 1978), Ariyoshi Sawako describes two sisters who sacrifice themselves for their brother’s education.


34. Mori Yasuhide, “Shimun-chô ni miru kinsai josei no life cycle,” Rekishi hyoron, no. 431 (March 1986): 35. Mori suggested that most marriages took place between families living within ten kilometers of each other, the distance that could be traveled both ways in a day; see Mori, “Bakumatsu ishin-ki sonraku josei no life cycle (pt. 2),” 171-73. See also Miyashita, “Nōson ni okeru kazoku,” 51.


36. Mori, “Bakumatsu ishin-ki sonraku josei no life cycle (pt. 1),” 159-61; Osaka, “Onna no kurashi,” 123-24. In between 18 and 19 percent of the families in the new field villages of Sagamihara, the wives were older than their husbands.
sometimes kin married kin, and families with sidelines that contributed significantly to the household economy found brides skilled in business management.\textsuperscript{37} Marriage thus tended to reinforce economic divisions and social distinctions.\textsuperscript{38} This fact may have been advantageous to Japanese women, who, although typically entering their husband’s family as strangers and needing to be trained in the ways of their new home, may not have been as intimidated and unprepared to assume new household responsibilities as Chinese women, who tended to marry into families of higher status than their own and to be overawed by the power and wealth of their in-laws.\textsuperscript{39}

Furthermore, not all daughters left their natal families upon marriage. We have already seen instances of women from poor families staying with their parents even after marrying in order to help with the farm work. In cases where a family had sufficient property but lacked an heir, it readily adopted a son-in-law or even a daughter to carry on the lineage, for the continuity of the family name and the worship of family ancestors was deemed more important than the perpetuation of bloodlines. Of the marriages in the area around Higashi Matsuyama, 15 percent involved the groom moving into the bride’s home, a figure compatible with the rates found in other areas.\textsuperscript{40}

Adopting a son-in-law was often the first response to a crisis caused by the death of a family’s males.\textsuperscript{41} Male adoptions were far less likely to result in a permanent union than taking in a bride, perhaps because males were less willing to adapt themselves to the customs of a different household, or perhaps because any man willing to be adopted already had flaws in his character that prevented him from maintaining an independent livelihood. As Jane Bachnik has pointed out, an adopted husband faced many of the same difficulties as a young bride coming into a house. If he did not get along with his new family, he was the one to leave, even if he had already become the titular head of the family.\textsuperscript{42}

Records from other parts of Japan suggest that when a daughter stayed in the family, she functioned as the househead even though her husband might be given the formal title in official records. Hirose Chiyo from Eshima in Harima had an adopted husband, and she knew more about what was going on than he did. Like a modern career woman, she found herself holding down two jobs: domestic work and the family cloth-making business.\textsuperscript{43} She clearly had authority to make decisions in both realms.

Although concern for the family’s future was the usual reason for bringing a groom into the family, in wealthy peasant families more emotional factors might also play a role. The Suzuki family in Echigo, for example, obviously used adoption to secure the future of its women. The family head in the early nineteenth century, Bokushi, adopted an heir and a husband for his daughter Kuwa and jettisoned his son Yakachi, born to his fifth wife late in his life. Before Suwa, his deceased son’s daughter, was twelve years old, she had received a number of marriage proposals, but her grandfather refused all of them. Then Kichi- sho, the third son from a prominent family a few villages away, was apprenticed to the Suzuki family. He helped out in the store and generally made himself agreeable. A year later he married Suwa when she was just sixteen years old, and a few months later Bokushi drew up a contract to establish Kichi- sho and Suwa as a branch family. Rather than allow his beloved granddaughter to suffer the vicissitudes of leaving the family, Bokushi sought to guarantee her future at the expense of the main house and his officially designated heir. Unlike her female relatives, Suwa had a chance to get to know her husband before the wedding. As Bokushi said, “He suits the family and harmonizes well. Since last spring we have drawn closer together.”\textsuperscript{44}

What did harmony mean in peasant families? Harmony was usually the bride’s responsibility and meant that she had to refrain from quarreling with the members of her new household, do the work expected of her position, and conform to family customs. Yet according to the precepts written for peasants by samurai intellectuals and the peasants themselves, the basis for harmony lay in the consummated relations of the couple itself. “The married couple is the foundation of morality. A couple is basically lustful, and if they get along, they produce a righteous


\textsuperscript{38} Miyashita, “Nôson ni okeru kazoku,” 52–53.


\textsuperscript{40} Higashi Matsuyama—shi no rekishi, 560–66; Miyashita, “Nôson ni okeru kazoku,” 44.


\textsuperscript{43} Miyashita, “Nôson ni okeru kazoku,” 60–61.

\textsuperscript{44} Suzuki Bokushi no shiryô shô, 26, 52, 60, 61, 62, 63.
harmony, but if they do not, everything falls apart." Thus affection and social necessity went hand in hand, and herein lay the possibility of intimate space for the married couple apart from the family. The author of Nōyaku kikō (Observations of agricultural practices) suggests as much in his account of an overnight stay at a farmhouse in the Kiso valley. The newlyweds in his host family went to bed early and, separated from the others by only a screen, began noisy lovemaking. "Outrageous," exclaimed the guest, whereupon the old woman of the family got angry. "Harmony between the husband and wife is the basis of prosperity for the descendants. Rather than not have this auspicious intimacy, I permit their coupling day and night. People who laugh at their passion are themselves outrageous. Get out!"

Japanese peasant households may have maintained an intimate space for young couples even when no privacy existed because satisfaction of the couple's needs was deemed the necessary basis for the harmonious maintenance of family and household. In cases of arranged marriage, a woman met her husband for the first time on her wedding day; if they were to work together for the rest of their lives and perpetuate the family, it was important to come to an understanding of each other as quickly as possible.

The mediating factor here was lust, a passion validated in the practice of premarital night visits and evidently given greater latitude within the Japanese peasantry than the military aristocracy, or, for that matter, the French peasantry. In France, there was not only no physical space for privacy (as in Japan) but also no intimacy. The married couple did not feel the need to be isolated in a room, nor was bed the place for sex. For French peasants, Martine Segalen has argued, sexuality was "less fundamental than it is today. . . . the success of sexual relations was less important than the success of the farm." Therefore, "the notion of the couple has no great meaning in the nineteenth-century [French] rural family." Ironically, while sexuality seems to have become more important for a successful marriage in contemporary France, the reverse is true for Japan, at least in urban areas.

45. Shiga, Nikon joshi kyōikuhi, 289.
46. Ibid., 292.

In addition to preserving family harmony, married women also bore a responsibility comparable to their husband's for the family's economic survival. Unlike samurai women whose sideline industries, if any, were always subordinate to and separate from their husband's official duties, in peasant families women and men worked closely together. Generally women did the tedious and time-consuming work, whereas men did the work that was heavy and dangerous. Agricultural development in the eighteenth century required peasant women to add handicrafts and field work to their domestic chores. According to a "Record of Customs" ("Fizoku-chō") written in Aizu in 1807, "within the last thirty years women have taken hoes and dig in the fields alongside the men, . . . and a really strong woman can work harder than a man." Because women who worked in the fields dressed like men and left their hair unkempt, the sexes could not be told apart.

Although women worked alongside men in the fields, they were not paid equal wages. "A Painstaking Record" ("Ryūryū shinikorojiku"), written in Echigo in 1805, shows that in the eighteenth century women were paid half or less what men made, but by the nineteenth century their pay increased to two-thirds that of men. At rice transplanting time, when female labor was at a premium, they received almost a man's wages. Even when women did the same work as men, however, their pay was less, possibly because the supervisors were male. Household work, including cottage industries that produced a cash income, was always valued less than a man's work. Despite regional differences and variations in the scale of the family enterprise, the opportunity for women to work alongside their men simply meant that they worked more.

Women from wealthy peasant families, which tended to have more members, did little or no field work, but they were expected to assist their husbands, supervise the maids, and look after the children and dependent siblings. They also produced cloth and worked in the family business. Suzuki Kayo, from a village near Tachikawa, spun silk and acted as a moneylender, even loaning sums of ten to twenty ryō to her own husband. Suzuki Toyo, from Echigo, helped her husband in the crepe trade and spun thread whenever she had free time. When she was past sixty years old she made a piece of cloth and put the profits from

51. Ibid., 68, 69, 76, 80–81, 86–87.
its sale into a revolving credit association (tanomoshiko). Her earnings of five ryō, which she turned over to her son, Bokushi, helped him pay for a new storehouse. “My old mother never used anything but the roughest of bedding,” he wrote, “but since the most important thing for business is a storehouse, she wanted it to be a success.”

Committed to the prosperity of her family and her descendants, a farm woman expected no less than to work long, hard hours. But in the culture of marriage, a woman was more-than a beast of burden; she was the helpmate of her husband. The precepts handed down from the ruling class may have emphasized a wife’s subordination to her husband and his family, but among the peasantry women held a more equitable position, one that even enabled them to talk back to their husbands, as did Tomi from Sagamihara in 1846. Her husband came home one night to find her absent, and when she appeared and he asked her what she had been doing, she replied, “None of your business.” They then started shouting so loudly that the neighbors interfered. In a mountain village of central Japan, Ken, who had the reputation of being “strong-willed and selfish,” brought suit to investigate the murder of her brother by her relatives and village officials. Thus, although examples can surely be found of battered and downtrodden wives, there were also wives who might be educated and independent, women who expected to be treated with respect. As Suzuki Bokushi wrote in his family history, “My beloved mother had great integrity and quarreled with no one. Indeed, she never got angry but devoted herself to my father, and they worked together like the two wheels of a cart.”

Most marital relations were so unremarkable as to pass almost unnoticed in the records; only descriptions of problem marriages expose the assumptions regarding the expected role of wives. One example is the marriage of the wealthy Suzuki Bokushi in 1792 to a seventeen-year-old girl named Mine. Although good-natured and well liked, Mine had been separated from her mother while still young and grew up without any training in the art of household management. Her deficiencies in this area led the Suzuki family to return her and her baggage to her natal home, even though she had given birth to a boy within the first year of marriage. We can surmise from this case that the ability to bear sons was not the only or even the most important test of a daughter-in-law’s acceptability: skill in running a household, at least among wealthy families, was possibly even more important.

53. Suzuki Bokushi no shiryō-shū, 21, 290.
54. Osada, “Kinsei nōson josei no ichidanmen,” 29. For arguments supporting the position that women talked back to their husbands, see Kumagai, “Modernization and the Family”; and Smith, “Making Village Women into ‘Good Wives and Wise Mothers.’” In Snow Country Tales, Suzuki Bokushi asserted that “unless from time to time [a wife] speaks up in place of her husband, family affairs will be a mess” (50). Yajima Tetsu, a member of the samurai class, despised her husband, scolded him, and called him stupid; see McClellan, Woman in the Crested Kimono, 114.
57. Ibid., 13, 14. In this region, a bride’s dowry consisted of personal possessions; in contrast, one document from Echizen shows a dowry of twenty-eight ryō; see Henderson, Village “Contracts,” 141.
This conclusion is also suggested by the case of the Yoshimura family, a peasant entrepreneurial household from the Kinai region, which included the following statement in a marriage contract drawn up in 1749: "Because we are a farming family, the household enterprises are very important. Managing the household and instructing the maids is crucial for the bride. If she cannot do that, she will not suit our social standing." For wealthy peasants (though probably not for the poor), the fertile womb was indeed less significant than the ability to maintain the family's fortune and reputation.

The question of divorce highlights further differences between samurai morals and customs on the one hand and diverse peasant practices on the other. According to samurai teachings, widows and divorcées were not expected to remarry. Tales of virtuous women recount how they committed suicide rather than accept a second marriage—behavior praised also in China, where chastity was the crucial expression of female fidelity. Only a man, furthermore, could initiate divorce, either by copying a prescribed three and one-half lines telling his wife to leave, or simply by sending her baggage back to her natal home. A woman could do nothing to prevent the divorce or to protect her access to her children.

Peasant practices, in contrast, often ignored the norms of the military aristocracy. For one thing, the divorce rate, according to one study of village ledgers near Osaka, was at least 15 percent (possibly even higher, since these documents include only cases where the marriages had lasted over a year). In addition, peasant women as well as men initiated divorce. The eldest daughter of Sekiguchi Toemon married and had three children before deciding to live alone in a temple. In 1857, a woman named Nobu, claiming "disharmony in the household," appealed to the local government office for a separation from her husband. He was a heavy drinker, and her father paid him one ryō to agree to a divorce.

One way for a woman to get a divorce was to go to an "enkiridera," a temple for severing marital connections. In the last half of the Tokugawa period, some two thousand women apparently sought the services of such a temple, Tōkeiji, in Kamakura. According to custom, if a married woman entered this temple and performed its rites for three years, the bond between her and her husband was broken. For women in a hurry, Buddhist temple officials served as divorce brokers. They would go to the husband's village and camp at the headman's door until he summoned the husband and forced him to agree to an amicable divorce. In most cases, just the news that the temple officials were coming was enough to produce a letter of separation. For their services the officials charged a stiff ten ryō. Mantokuji in Kōzuke was another refuge for women who wanted a divorce. According to its records, Iku found her husband's violent behavior so intolerable that she sought shelter there. She had to convince both her father and her husband to let her have a divorce, and the temple offered her the only haven from which to do so.

For poor women, divorce was simply a matter of leaving the husband's home. Where children were concerned, however, it was more complicated. Wealthy peasants usually kept all the children born into the family: Suzuki Bokushi's three children were raised by him after he divorced their mothers. But when Riyo, wet nurse to his first son, left her husband because he had pawned her clothes, she took her daughter with her. Riyo had been married previously, then divorced, and then had lived with another man before this second marriage. Her third husband had turned out to be a thief who absconded to avoid being arrested. "She had worked diligently at her chores, and she had taken good care of our son. How regrettable her fate despite her admirable spirit," wrote Bokushi. Scattered throughout the village records are references to women who took both sons and daughters with them at divorce. While it was relatively easy for a poor woman to leave her husband, opportunities for a good remarriage, not to mention financial security for her children, were considerably more limited than those for a wealthier woman.

58. Miyashita, "Nōson ni okeru kazoku," 54–55. Miyashita, "Kinsei ie ni okeru boshinsha," 25, has also pointed out that most divorces occurred within the first three years of marriage, which suggests that the inability to have children was not the cause.
60. Miyashita, "Nōson ni okeru kazoku," 49–50. In Taishido, the average length of marriage in fifteen divorce cases was seven years, the shortest period being nine months, the longest eighteen years. Divorce was likely to take place earlier than it does in modern Japan (where most women who are divorced are in their forties and fifties); see Mori, "Bakumatsu ishin-ki sonraku josei no life cycle (pt. 2)," 164–70.
61. Osada, "Onna no kurashi," 111. A woman named Sato left her husband after six months of marriage in 1816 because she did not want to do agricultural work; see ibid., 115–16.
63. Higuchi, Nippon joshi ni hokkatsu, 223–24. Osada, "Onna no kurashi," 110–11, has evidence of two cases in which the temple forced men to agree to divorce. One couple had been so passionately in love that they had eloped, but later the wife changed her mind.
64. Sakurai (ed.), Shin Nikkō jōjū, 262.
65. Suzuki Bokushi no shōryō shiki, 15.
66. Higuchi Matsuyama-shi no rekishi, 364–67; Mori, "Bakumatsu ishin-ki sonraku josei no life cycle (pt. 2)," 164–70. At the end of the Tokugawa period, even the wife of a samurai who left her husband might keep her children; see McClellan, Woman in the Crested Kimono, 101.
Peasants did remarry, however, sometimes as many as three or four times. Some members of peasant society practiced what can only be called serial marriage. As Alice Mabel Bacon, a traveler to Japan in the late nineteenth century, observed, “Until very recently, the marriage relation in Japan was by no means a permanent one.… It was not an unusual occurrence for a man to marry and divorce several wives in succession, and for a woman to marry well a second or even a third time.” Even in the 1930s, the men and women of Suye divorced and remarried at a rate that astonished contemporary observers.

Among peasants, remarriage did not necessarily incur the stigma for divorcees or widows that it did in samurai society. Even after Suzuki Bokushi’s young bride Mine was sent back to her parents, the Suzukis maintained an interest in her affairs, and her son and granddaughter occasionally visited her. At her second marriage, Bokushi acted as her patron (oyabun). When that marriage soon ended in divorce, she married a third time, having two children before the family broke off relations. Finally she married a widower, the headman of a nearby village. Years later Bokushi proposed to remarry her, but the negotiations came to naught.

Curiously, divorce and remarriage were especially prevalent among the wealthiest families, who otherwise were most likely to imitate samurai customs. The wealthy married at a younger age than poorer peasants, a practice that may have led to greater marital discord. Then, too, they could afford to be more selective in arranging marriages for their children. In addition, wives had greater autonomy in matters of divorce and remarriage. Suzuki Bokushi’s sister Taka married Matsunaga Hyōshi when she was nineteen years old, but less than a year later she was back home. Her husband explained that his father’s stinginess had depressed the young bride and therefore Hyōshi had decided to send Taka back to her parents for a while. Two weeks later came the news that Hyōshi had smallpox and was calling for Taka. She returned to nurse him until he died. Having lost his sole heir, her father-in-law proposed that Taka succeed him, but she adamantly refused and eventually married into another family. In another example from the Suzuki family, four years after the death of Bokushi’s son his daughter-in-law Yasu married Miya Kizaeemon, recently a widower and at least twenty years her senior. He died eighteen months later, and the family asked her to remain as the widow in the main house, promising that as soon as her mother-in-law died she would become the oyabun (family head). At that point she could make up her own mind whether to marry again or retire. Although she recognized her ethical obligation to remain as a matter of form, Yasu nevertheless refused and returned to the Suzuki family.

Wealthy peasant women thus could manipulate their marital relations to protect their own best interests. In contrast to China, where authority over a widow’s fate remained with her husband’s family, in Japan no customary provisions seem to have been made for the wife; consequently, both the natal and marital families of a well-connected Japanese woman might quarrel over her future. By taking advantage of the conflict, a woman could decide for herself which family offered the best conditions or play one off against the other, as Yasu did by moving back and forth. No one disapproved of Yasu’s willfulness; indeed, her third husband, who waited four years for her, was an extremely prestigious figure in local affairs.

While peasants apparently set little store by chastity, illicit affairs and adultery presented a more serious threat to the fabric of community life. In 1821 Suzuki Bokushi heard that the Yawata widow, after having committed adultery with her adopted grandson, had given birth to a boy. A relative agreed to take the baby and find a wet nurse for him, but even so her situation became so difficult that she ran away. After she had apologized to her natal family and her in-laws, she was allowed to return to the Yawata house in the middle of the night. Despite the shame she brought on her family, however, she does not appear to have been punished in any way. Indeed, the type of scandals recorded by Bokushi were still rocking villages one hundred years later, according to the accounts in The Women of Suye Mura. What is remarkable is the relative lenience with which they were treated, given the standards of behavior idealized by the samurai and, later on, by government bureaucrats.

In the records of villages in the Sagamihara region, Osaka Kanako found seven incidents concerning adultery. In one, the husband, who was the grandson and heir of a village official, killed his wife and her lover, a servant, when he caught them together. Perhaps it was the difference in status that propelled him to this act, or perhaps

68. *Suzuki Bokushi* no shirō shū, 22.
69. Ibid., 7, 16, 17, 20, 27, 42, 63, 81.
70. Ibid., 26, 28, 35, 37, 40, 42. Out of fifty-seven marriages in Taishidō, five women returned to their natal family at the death of their husband; see Mori, “Bakumatsu ishinkoki sonraku jōsei no life cycle (pt. 2),” 170.
he was simply short-tempered. In the other instances, even when the women had eloped with their lovers they were forgiven by their husbands and neighbors upon their return. The original marriage brokers for one marriage wanted the wife to be divorced because she had committed adultery, but her husband replied that as far as he was concerned, that was only a rumor.74 Once a woman gave up her unlicensed sexuality and returned to her social role as a wife, not only her family but the community as well seems to have been willing to accept her back.

On another plane, scandals point to the ambivalence that characterizes sexuality and the feminine personality in rural society generally, and the fear in which these are held. In Japan, as in France, the concept of woman exerted a twofold power over both household and husband. At the material level, a woman maintained the family reputation and managed everyday affairs, but at a symbolic level she was a sorceress, and her body was seen to be the site of taboos that, if broken, brought misfortune on the farm and its inhabitants.75 Thus, although the Shinto emphasis on fertility gave special value to women and religious significance to their labor in transplanting rice, Shinto ideas of pollution required menstruating women to eat and sleep apart from their families.76

To circumscribe the power of mature female sexuality, men tried to direct it either to the confines of the red light district or to marriage. In 1846, the men of Inoshikakata village (now part of Komae city) made a public appeal to the intendant concerning the woman Rika, who had appeared six or seven years earlier. "She associates with gamblers and the young men of the village," they complained, "and she has made herself quite popular with them. At her drinking parties, she meddles in all sorts of proposals. . . . She is leading the youth of this village astray, and this will cause the village to decline. She has used evil tricks to ingratiate herself with village officials, and no one will stand up to her openly. We think she should be expelled."77 The men behind this appeal clearly saw themselves as victims. Here, and in the scandal of the widow recounted by Suzuki Bokushi, the implication is that sexual misconduct was the woman's fault: she was the seductress and the instigator in any affair. This assumption that the woman is always guilty is not unique to Japanese society, and as the gossip repeated in The Women of Suve Mura indicates, even women themselves often blamed the female in illicit affairs.


78. Yamana, "Nōkakun," 205. When Hirose Tansō (1782–1856) was still in his mother's womb, his grandmother made a pilgrimage through all the eighty-eight temples on the Shikoku circuit to pray for her son's bride's safe birth; see Takuamoto Manabu, Chidō bunjin (Kyōkusha, 1977), 144. The Katō family from a village in Owari preserved two documents concerning childbirth: onē described the methods for changing a child's sex to that of a boy; the other described how to have a safe birth; see Hayashi Hideo, "Katō ke Mono mokuroku," Shoun 18, no. 1 (June 1957): 92.
82. Ariyoshi, Doctor's Wife, 105.

Mothers

Of the three stages in the lives of rural women, that of mother was the most problematical. The fundamental responsibility of the respectable married woman was to produce heirs who would carry on the family line (and care for her in her old age). Yet not all women were able to produce children. Moreover, every mother would probably experience the loss of at least one child. As Yamana Bunsei wrote, "When a wife first realizes she is pregnant, she worries day and night whether she will have a safe birth. Nothing can be done if the birth is difficult."78 In one village, over 20 percent of children under age five died, and only 64 percent survived to maturity.79 The Suzuki family history from Echigo shows that even the wealthy were plagued with miscarriages, stillbirths, and infant deaths. Of Suzuki Bokushi's six wives, only three managed to bear children.80

Relations between parents and children were presumably governed by Confucian precepts of filial piety, which emphasized the obligatory nature of human relations rather than the natural bonds of affection that exist between parent and child. A mother's love was criticized, in fact, because it led to indulged and spoiled children, and a son who allowed his affection for his mother to grow beyond the bounds of obligation risked putting himself in her power.81 In The Doctor's Wife, a novel by Ariyoshi Sawako, Seishū's mother insists that she come before his wife, saying, "I am the mother who gave birth to you, so I, more than anyone else, understand what you want to accomplish."82

Genuine affection between mother and son is amply documented in our sources on wealthy households. The following three examples are typical. Maejima Zengorō, from the Ina valley, learned both poetry and nativism (kokugaku) from his mother, Mino, and for his nome de plume,
Seibi, he used the first character of her name, (Mi and Bi are both readings of the Chinese character for beauty.) Together they chose eight views of Ōshika, modeled after the famous eight views of Ōmi, for him to paint; after she wrote a poem on each picture, he capped it with his own verse. In the second case, Sekiguchi Tōemon, from a village near Yokohama, was so generous with allowances and travel expenses that his mother, Rie, was able to start her own moneylending business (charging even her son interest on his loans). His wife received considerably less attention. The third example is Suzuki Heikurō, who grieved deeply for his mother and eulogized her as follows: “Anyone would make some claim about his good fortune to have had such a mother, and nothing can be compared to the separation of parent and child. At my sick mother’s pillow, I pass the fullness of days, feeling how inadequately I have repaid her.” Heikurō fancied himself a poet, and the sorrow he expressed might be attributed to an excess of poetic hyperbole. Yet his eulogy, like our other examples, surely suggests that a close relationship between mother and son was one of the central facts of life for any family.

Once a mother of a wealthy peasant family became a mother-in-law, she had the leisure to indulge in travel. For rural women, freedom and responsibility were not compatible: only after they had surrendered their authority to their daughters-in-law could they go where they pleased. Suzuki Toyo chose to make a pilgrimage to the Chichibu shrine, then continued on to see the beautiful beaches of Enoshima, the medieval city of Kamakura, and the plays and festivities of Edo. She visited the shogunal shrine at Nikkō, and she went to see the sights of Niigata with in-laws and friends. At age seventy-two, she completed her seventh pilgrimage to the Zenkōji, a famous temple jointly run by the Pure Land and Tendai Buddhist sects in Nagano city and a popular destination for women pilgrims. Sekiguchi Rie went to temples, to hot springs, and to Edo to visit her grandchildren for a total of 410 trips before her death. Her daughter-in-law too, after becoming a mother-in-law, began to travel, making 238 trips, including visits to her natal home, a tradition that her son’s wife continued.

Even ordinary peasants encouraged their mothers to travel. Fuzō’s old mother from Sagamihara and four of her cronies made a pilgrimage to Chichibu in 1843, where they managed to visit twenty-one temples in two days, climbing up and down stairs and walking the whole way. They went to Zenkōji, then back to Nikkō, before returning home after a thirty-one-day trip. In the precincts of a shrine in Kamikarako, Saitama prefecture, is a stone monument commemorating a pilgrimage made by sixteen women up Mt. Fuji in 1860—despite the fact that Mt. Fuji was forbidden to women. Sons allowed these ventures out of respect for their mothers’ piety, but also perhaps because their absence eased strains within the family.

Rural women traveled for three reasons: to go on pilgrimage and see foreign sights, to visit relatives, and to take the waters at hot springs. These activities were also done by men, and they tied both sexes into the local network of interpersonal relations, entertainments, leisure pastimes, and the national culture. Since it was usually women who left their natal families at marriage, they were more likely to travel to see their parents and siblings, but they could expect reciprocal visits and inquiries after their health. Suzuki Bokushi, for example, maintained regular contact with his sisters, Kono and Fuji. Unlike China, where once a daughter left home she was gone for good, Japanese daughters preserved ties to their kin, celebrating their births and mourning their deaths.

Whereas the key to old-age security for a man was his wife, women were dependent instead on their children, largely because most husbands died first, leaving the women, if they were lucky, with a grown son to take over the family enterprise. In some areas of Japan, when a man with adult sons formally retired from the family headship at fifty to sixty years of age, his wife too relinquished her authority in the household—though in other areas (Dewa, for example) men continued in their position as family head until they died. In one village near Edo, succession took place at the death of the househead 53 percent of the time, and at his retirement 19 percent of the time. As Hayami Akira has pointed out, “Peasants arranged inheritance flexibly, without any particular principles in mind, and as the occasion demanded.”

86. Osada, “Kinsei nōson josei no ichidanmen;” 32; Higashi Matsuwa—shi no rekishi, 457.
87. Ellen R. Judd suggests that, especially in modern times and in certain regions of China, women have been able to maintain close ties with their natal families; see “Niaojia: Chinese Women and Their Natal Families,” Journal of Asian Studies 48, no. 3 (August 1989): 525–544.
88. Cornell, “Old Age Security.” Mori’s study of Taishidō shows that on the average women spent thirty-six years with their husbands and seventeen years as widows; see “Bakumatsu ishin-ki soraku josei no life cycle (pt. 2),” 162–64, 170, 186–89. Henderson, Village “Contracts,” 137–40, has translated two documents that show agreements made to provide allowances to widows.
and mother who had to adapt her "personal trajectory and tempo of biographical events" to the family's life course, the quality of her life after the death of her husband depended on her children's character.

Peasant and merchant families followed radically different strategies in trying to maintain themselves when a man died, disappeared, or was disinherited before his children were fully grown. William Hauser found that in Osaka, women seldom became household heads after 1730: the desire to restrict the scale of licensed households and their ability to set up branch shops may well have outweighed the imperative of family continuity.90 Among peasant families, in contrast, the rate for female succession increased in the early nineteenth century, when difficult economic times required simply mature adult leadership, whether male or female.

Nevertheless rates of female succession varied according to class and region. Even if her children were infants, a mother was less likely to be registered as household head in a wealthy family than in a poor one. Ōguchi Yūjirō has found that the likelihood of women being entered on the registers as family heads was least in the area around Edo, somewhat greater in Northern Japan, and greatest in the region near Osaka.91 In Higashideto, near Osaka, five women became heads of household even though their sons were over eighteen. In one village along the lower reaches of the Tama river, daughters occasionally took over the family even though an adult brother was still living at home. Most female households served only until their sons reached the age of seventeen or eighteen, but some continued to play a role in public affairs until their deaths.92

When women did become heads of household, their customary role varied from region to region. When one woman in Fuchinobe tried to attend an important meeting, she was turned back with the retort, "We need people with balls to handle this affair." In the Tama region, widows signed village documents along with the men, but they were exempted from the corvée duties assessed by the ruling authorities. In Ogatayama village (now part of Tsuru city), a recent search through farmhouse documents turned up the signed ballots used for voting for village officials. Among the signatures were those of six women, which

shows that they had the right to vote before the Meiji period.93 The granting of this right was probably a pragmatic response to family exigencies, but it also demonstrates that women might play what was normally a man's role depending on their structural position within the family. Only in the Meiji period did gender definitions become so strict as to preclude flexibility in role adaptation.

The quality of a woman's declining years depended on her family's composition and economic status. According to Suzuki Bokushi, her mother, Toyo, became quite pious in her old age. When her son was not reading military tales to her, she concentrated her efforts on being reborn in the Pure Land of Amida. In her final preparations for death she had a white kimono sewn for her funeral, paid the priest at Chōonji two hundred mon to write sutras, and gave her son her last testament in a sealed bag to be opened after her death.94 We can assume that Toyo had a good life. Her sole surviving son remained devoted to her, her family prospered, she had many relatives, friends, and neighbors with whom she could visit, she indulged in her hobbies, and she ordered her existence to its end. Other women were not so fortunate. Penniless and alone, Ken died at the age of seventy-six, and then it became the community's responsibility to erect a gravestone for her.95

To die without family and be buried alone was a terrible fate in Tokugawa Japan. For this reason it was important to have descendants who would guarantee that the funeral was performed properly and that memorial services were held on a regular basis. Suzuki Bokushi carefully recorded the death anniversaries and memorial services held for his sisters and his ancestors, and he made sure that his little sister Taka, who died without heirs, would not be forgotten after her death. After his third wife, Uta, died, he had a stone pagoda carved in her memory, and he set aside fields and paddies as an endowment for her memorial services, for she too died without direct descendants. "These fields are more important than words can express," he wrote. "They represent the family's prayers."96 Memorial services were held for women as well as men, whether mothers, wives, or sisters. The requirements of the peasant family enterprise exploited all members of the household, but it also guaranteed them a secure future in the hereafter. Women who left their natal home for that of a stranger were indeed at a disadvantage, but

91. Suzuki Bokushi no shiryō shō, 30.
at least in wealthy families they were ultimately included in the rituals performed for the ancestors.

CONCLUSION

Given the diversity of local practices in Tokugawa Japan, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the typical role of women. The last half of the Tokugawa period brought changes into the preindustrial agricultural order that had a profound impact on women’s lives. Their exposure to education and travel, their work experiences both before and during marriage, and their sexual history constitute social data that defy any narrowly focused assumptions. Although the survival of all family members depended on the cooperation and harmony of husband and wife, mother and son, the specific strategies followed by each family and, indeed, the constitution of the family itself depended on access to economic resources and the possibilities contained by each region.

Thus, two seemingly contradictory views of peasant women that currently exist in Japanese research may merely represent two ends of the broad spectrum of peasant family practices shaped by economic circumstance, historical processes, regional differences, and variations in household composition. In one view, Inoue Kiyoshi argues that women were oppressed by the patriarchal system and dominated by their mothers-in-law. In the other view, Ienaga Saburo claims that female labor played such a crucial role in household finances that women were more important than their husbands in maintaining the family over time. To a certain extent, both views are correct. Women in wealthy families were more likely to experience the weight of family traditions epitomized by the mother-in-law’s authority; while this was less true for women in poor families, they had to struggle for a livelihood.

As our data show, however, even these generalizations do not always hold true. If there is any one conclusion we can draw from our diverse research findings, therefore, it is this: survival in preindustrial society required that rural women’s roles be flexible, and this flexibility led to much more variation in social relationships between the sexes than the leaders of the Meiji state in the late nineteenth century either expected or condoned.