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Hard Times in the Kantō: Economic Change and Village Life in Late Tokugawa Japan

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Introduction

Things were not right in the Kantō region during the early nineteenth century. In his memoirs, Matsudaira Sadanobu, architect of the Kansei Reforms, lamented the sorry state of the villages in Edo's hinterland:

Much land throughout the Kantō is going to waste for want of cultivators. All the people of some villages have left for Edo, leaving only the headman behind. . . . Many Kantō villagers are suffering great hardship. Babies are killed, the population has declined, and land has gone to waste.¹

In this paper I will examine the decline and subsequent recovery of villages in the eastern Kantō as a study in the inability of late Tokugawa Japan to adapt to changes in the social and economic structure of the countryside. My discussion will center on the social dislocation that occurred as a result of the rapid commercialization of the Kantō and the responses of the Tokugawa state and local elites to that dislocation. I will argue that the Kantō villages declined because the Tokugawa polity had neither the institutional nor the cultural mechanisms to cope with rapid commercialization, despite the fact that the continued habitation of agricultural villages was politically and economically vital for the bakufu, and the maintenance of community life was socially and culturally important for peasants. Contemporary commentators' sense of crisis in the Kantō was exacerbated by the region's importance as the bakufu's home territory and by the sudden

I would like to thank Marius B. Jansen, Sheldon M. Garon, Helen Hardacre, and Michael Tsien, all of Princeton University, for their advice and comments on this paper.

¹ Matsudaira Sadanobu, *Uge no hitokoto*, ed. Matsudaira Sadamitsu (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1943, repr. 1975), pp. 113–14, 131.

emergence of a massive market in Edo, which accelerated the transition to market-oriented production. Only during the last years of the Tokugawa period did some local activists realize that practical efforts, like material aid to peasants who wished to stay in agriculture, were needed if many village communities were to remain viable.

Both taxation and social order depended upon the existence of a stable base of rice-growing farmers living in village communities. Once people left the countryside—whether pushed by poverty or pulled by opportunity—the state lost a good measure of control over their incomes and actions. The bakufu, unable to adapt adequately to changes in the economic structure, including the increased importance of cash crops and nonagricultural pursuits and the phenomenal growth of market towns, tried to prevent economic and demographic change through sumptuary laws and moral injunctions. When these efforts failed, contemporary observers could see only a rural society in decay, rather than a growing and dynamic economy. This is the key to the paradox of the evidence, in which accounts lamenting the desolation of villages and the lack of social order contradict clear signs of a rising standard of living.

In English, Thomas C. Smith and Osamu Saitō have looked at similar economic change in other areas of late Tokugawa Japan. However, they concentrated on the implications of the diversification of the rural economy for Japan's later industrialization, rather than on the significance of change within the context of Tokugawa social and economic history. Smith examined the growth of experience with markets and manufacturing, while Saitō analyzed the expansion of commercial agriculture, tenancy, and wage labor, with the conclusion that economic change did not speed the differentiation of the peasantry, nor was there a reservoir of surplus labor in the countryside to fuel later industrial development.²

Most students of the social and economic history of the Kantō have similarly used late Tokugawa developments to assess the nature of the Meiji period. In contrast to Smith and Saitō, who are relatively optimistic because they see the Tokugawa roots of Japanese industrialization, Kantō historians are generally pessimistic because they feel that the differentiation of the peasantry during the nineteenth

² Thomas C. Smith, 'Farm Family By-employments in Preindustrial Japan,' *Journal of Economic History* 29 (1969), pp. 687–715, discussed Chōshū. Osamu Saitō, 'The Rural Economy: Commercial Agriculture, By-employment, and Wage Work', *Japan in Transition: From Tokugawa to Meiji*, ed. Marius B. Jansen and Gilbert Rozman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 400–20, dealt with Yamanashi and Osaka.

century was a major cost of capitalist development. They accordingly tend to focus on the transformation of social relations, from dependency on other members of the community to dependency on the market, and the concomitant separation of those with control over the means of production (landlords) from those without (tenants and wage laborers). They see the decline of the countryside as an adjustment to that process of differentiation.³ Here I will avoid judgements about the relative costs and benefits of social and economic change, and instead try to interpret Tokugawa society on its own terms.

The rural Kantō became intimately linked to the rest of the national economy sometime during the early eighteenth century. For the first time, essential goods and markets had to be sought outside the immediate area on a significant scale. Agricultural products, including rice, became commodities to be bought and sold. Peasants learned to rely on a variety of new ways to boost agricultural productivity, including farm implements and commercial fertilizers, but at the same time became more dependent on money. Peasants benefited in many ways from the growth of markets, both by producing commodities for sale and by gaining access to goods produced elsewhere. However, participation in the market brought about changes in the social relations of the villages, changes that required a painful period of adjustment.

Distinct from the question of how peasants—either individually or as a class—fared economically is the fate of the village community as the basic unit of the Tokugawa economic and institutional order. The consensus in the literature on the Kantō, echoing contemporary accounts, is that agricultural villages in the region declined seriously during the late Tokugawa period. Village populations fell—often dramatically—and land was frequently left uncultivated as a result. Dislocation was not limited to landless or nearly landless cultivators, but instead affected all levels of the peasantry. Some small-scale cultivators left the villages because they could not make a living from

³ There is an extensive literature on the Kantō. Although they disagree strongly on specifics, the authors listed below all share a common concern with the dynamics of structural transformation. See, for example, Nagahara Keiji and Nagakura Tamotsu, 'Kōshin jikyūteki nōgyō chitai ni okeru murakata jinushisei no tenkai—kita Kantō no jirei o chūshin ni,' *Shigaku zasshi* 64: 1–2 (January–February 1955), pp. 1–20, 36–48; Kitoda Shirō, 'Ishinki no gōnōsō, Ibaragi ken shi kenkyū 10–11 (March–July 1968) pp. 5–20, 24–47; Nagakura Tamotsu, 'Kantō nōson no kōhai to gōnō no mondai', *Ibaragi ken shi kenkyū* 16 (March 1970), pp. 1–17 (a response to Kitoda's article); Kitoda, 'Kantō nōson no kōhai to burujoateki hatten—gōnōsō kenkyū no ichi shikaku', *Shakai keizai shigaku* 36 (1971), pp. 425–49; and Hasegawa Shinzō, 'Kinsei kōki kita Kantō nōson no kōhai o megutte', *Shigaku zasshi* 81:9 (September 1972), pp. 37–64.

their meagre holdings; others were lured by better prospects elsewhere. Peasants with more land ran into trouble because the manpower shortage made agricultural labor extremely expensive, or at times nearly impossible to obtain. Unable to keep all their land under cultivation, yet responsible for taxes on their entire holdings, many wealthy peasants were forced into debt, which eventually led to their downfall. The process of decline began sometime in the first half of the eighteenth century and ended no later than the mid-nineteenth century.

The nature of the changes occurring at this time was such that the same events can serve to support both an optimistic and a pessimistic argument. For example, in an undated petition, villagers from six villages in Shimōsa province (now Chiba prefecture) complained about the activities of prostitutes in two nearby coastal villages. The petition stated that, because tax-rice shipments from other domains passed through the two villages, there had always been one or two 'waitresses' at the inns, ready to 'pour tea' for lonely sailors. However, over the past forty or fifty years the number of these women had increased to the point that there were seventy or eighty teahouses in the villages, 'no different from the brothels in the castle town'. Things were even worse in nearby Chōshi, which was booming due to the expansion of fishing in the area. Young men from the countryside, traveling into town to sell rice, firewood, and vegetables, were accosted by prostitutes. Young men being what they are, they would soon find themselves drunk and penniless, or worse, deeply indebted to the teahouses. If they did not settle their debts, thugs would visit their homes and demand payment. As a result, the petitioners complained, impressionable youths fell in with ruffians and decent folk were forced to flee their villages, leaving fields untilled and taxes unpaid. The petition ended with a plea that the authorities step in and control the brothels.⁴

Market relations had a clearly disruptive influence on local society, yet it was only because of the emergence of a market for farm produce that there was enough wealth in the villages for the youths to afford commodities like the favors of teahouse waitresses. The salient point about this example, however, is the link between the intensification of commercial activity and the collapse of the village community, which in turn posed a threat to the state in the form of unpaid taxes and renegade peasants roaming the countryside. The rest of this paper will

⁴ 'Yūjōya toritsubushi no gi ni tsuki Ōta mura hoka muramura negaigaki,' *Chiba ken shiryō: kinsei hen Shimōsa no kuni*, ed. Chiba ken shi hensan kyōgikai (Chiba: Chiba ken, 1958), vol. 1, pp. 322-3.

examine examples of increased commercialization and the response of the state.

The Changing Face of the Countryside

There is ample evidence of widespread peasant participation in market relations in the eastern Kantō region. An excellent example is the growth of Chōshi, a town at the mouth of the Tone river. The town (actually a conglomerate of several administratively distinct villages) began to grow in the seventeenth century, after the Tone became an important artery for transporting tax rice from domains in the Tōhoku region to Edo.⁵ It was also a primary center of production of dried sardines (*hoshika*), which were used as commercial fertilizer.

Chōshi was already an important town in the first quarter of the eighteenth century. A contemporary document reports that, although there had been only twenty-seven families in Iinuma village (one of those comprising Chōshi) in 1593, during the years since, 'it has continually grown more prosperous. People from many provinces have settled down and become residents, so that now there are 241 landed-peasant [*hyakushō*] households and more than 1,300 landless-peasant and transient [*mizunomi-byakushō*, *tabibito*] households in the village.'⁶ The same document states that in 1720 Iinuma village had 6,849 residents in 1,492 households. The breakdown by sex (4,599 men versus 2,164 women, excluding miscellaneous groups of residents, or 213 men for every 100 women) suggests the presence of a large number of laborers from the countryside.⁷ By 1755, Iinuma had grown to 7,193 residents in 1,755 households. The community had stabilized considerably, as the decreased sex ratio of 141 (4,207 men to 2,986 women) indicates.⁸ In 1733, Takagami village, also part of Chōshi, had a total of 591 households, of which 255 were landed peasants, ninety-nine were landless peasants, fifty-four were landless fishermen, 169 were landless dried-sardine merchants, and seven each were priests and doctors. An

⁵ See Kawana Noboru, *Kashi ni ikiru hitobito: Tonegawa suibun no shakaishi* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1982), for a fascinating description of life on the Tone river.

⁶ Tanaka Genba [Shigeaki], 'Genba sendaishū', ed. Shinozaki Shirō, *Nihon toshi seikatsu shiryō shūsei* (Tokyo: Gakushū kenkyūsha, 1976), vol. 7 (*minatomachi hen II*), p. 720. This document was written by the fifth head of the Tanaka family, which operated the Higeta shōyu brewery in Chōshi, discussed below. See Shinozaki's introduction, pp. 37-8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 721.

⁸ 'Kōdaishū bassho', *Chiba ken shiryō: kinsei hen Shimōsa no kuni*, vol. 1, p. 481. This document was compiled sometime after 1755 by later members of the Tanaka family.

overwhelming majority of the residents were men—3,876 against 1,003 women. Although no residents worked outside the village, some 2,279 outsiders—almost all men—worked as indentured or apprenticed laborers (*hōkōnin*) in Takagami. Many of these men may have been fishermen from the Kii peninsula, in central Honshū, who migrated to the Pacific coast of the Bōsō peninsula in large numbers to take advantage of the opportunities for sardine fishing.⁹

Chōshi is probably best known for its shōyu-brewing industry, which became an important factor in the local economy in the early eighteenth century. Two major brewers, Yamasa and Higeta (both are still in business), were based there. By the middle of the eighteenth century local brewers produced upwards of 65,000 barrels of shōyu annually, almost entirely for the Edo market. Because the bulk of production went to Edo, the breweries operated in a sort of vacuum, as their activities had a minimal impact on the economy of the surrounding countryside other than supporting an increase in soybean cultivation. However, during the second half of the eighteenth century, new breweries began to appear just outside of Edo that could produce large amounts of low-quality shōyu for sale to the Edo townspeople. This hurt the Chōshi breweries initially, but they responded by limiting production for the Edo market to high-quality shōyu and marketing lower-grade shōyu in nearby villages.¹⁰

Villagers could afford to buy shōyu, which had not yet become an everyday part of the peasant diet,¹¹ in part because Chōshi was an important market for agricultural produce (as the petition calling for the control of prostitution, cited above, indicates). Peasant households in the Chōshi area may also have benefited from the cash incomes of younger sons and daughters sent to town to work, but only at the cost of lost agricultural labor. This both contributed to the deterioration of

⁹ 'Takagami mura kyūki', *ibid.*, p. 508. The breakdown of outside laborers is as follows: 134 men and sixty-four women worked for landed peasants (*hyakushō*); 1,545 men worked as sardine fishermen; and 536 men worked for dried-sardine merchants. For the migration of Kii fishermen to Takagami, see 'Takagami', *Kadokawa Nihon chimei daijiten* (Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 1984), vol. 12 (*Chiba ken*), p. 513.

¹⁰ Shinoda Hisao, 'Chōshi tsukurijōyū nakama no kenkyū—Edo chimawari keizai no ichi danmen', *Chihōshi kenkyū* 129 (June 1974), pp. 25–43, especially pp. 27–36.

¹¹ Shōyu in its modern form is a sixteenth-century development. It was produced commercially in the Kii area as early as the late sixteenth century, elsewhere around the turn of the eighteenth century. Kimura Motoi, 'Nōmin seikatsu no shosō', *Taikei Nihon shi sōsho*, ed. Morisue Yoshiaki, Hōgetsu Keigo, and Kimura Motoi (Tokyo: Yamakawa shuppansha, 1965), vol. 16 (*seikatsu shi* II), p. 203. See also, W. Mark Fruin, *Kikkoman: Company, Clan, and Community*, Harvard Studies in Business History 35 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 14–16.

nearby villages and promoted the differentiation of the peasantry, as the newcomers to Chōshi remained landless and therefore ineligible to participate fully in the community. Conversely, the introduction of shōyu to the peasant diet represented an improvement in the standard of living, and the diffusion of shōyu-brewing technology may have created commercial opportunities for villagers who remained on the land.

The growth of commercial activity in Chōshi, while on a larger scale than most places, was not unique. A similar trend can be seen in other towns, especially those on transportation routes. Nojiri village, a river town with a yield of 498 *koku* not far from Chōshi, is one such example. In 1628, the village had 158 households (811 people), of which 144 were headed by landed peasants (*honbyakushō*), six by priests or nuns, and eight by landless peasants (*mizunomi-byakushō*). The village had seven shipping agents (*kashi ton'ya*), two tax-rice transporters (*jōmai unsō ton'ya*), and one sake brewer, and the peasants supplemented their agricultural incomes with stevedoring, but the village survey reported having no markets, no inns, no sericulture, no papermaking, no charcoal or salt manufacturing, and no coopers.¹² By 1717 the yield had fallen to 464 *koku*, but the population was up to 171 households.¹³ Another survey, submitted sixteen years later, reported that the population had risen to 185 households, but the composition of the village was vastly different from what it had been in 1628: the number of landed peasant households had fallen by more than half, to sixty-nine, while ninety-six landless peasant and eight landless merchant households had appeared, in addition to twelve temple households. Of a total population of 845, twenty-five men and nineteen women were servants hired from outside the village (of a total of twenty-six male and twenty-one female servants in the village). Conversely, eighty-five men and seventeen women from Nojiri were working away from home.¹⁴

Nojiri is an excellent example of the ambivalence of the situation in the Kantō. Population and commercial activity were on the rise, indicating prosperity, yet assessed yield had fallen and, more serious, the peasantry had been split into a small land-holding group and a much larger body of landless peasants. More than one hundred villagers took employment away from home. Since the demand for servants in Nojiri had to be filled almost entirely from the outside, those who left

¹² 'Nojiri mura meisaichō' [1628], *Chiba ken shiryō: kinsei hen Shimōsa no kuni*, vol. 1, pp. 331-8.

¹³ 'Nojiri mura sashidashichō [1717], *ibid.*, pp. 338-44.

¹⁴ 'Nojiri mura kakiagechō' [1733], *ibid.*, pp. 344-50.

home may have done so in search of better opportunities elsewhere.

The examples thus far have been of towns on important transportation routes, but widespread participation in the market, in the form of cash-crop cultivation, use of commercial fertilizer, and nonagricultural by-employments, can be seen in villages throughout the area.¹⁵ Kamo, a medium-sized (744 koku) village shared by a daimyo and a hatamoto in the foothills on the Pacific side of Awa (near the southern tip of the Bōsō peninsula) is an example of a remote community touched by a growing market economy. According to a 1793 survey, the peasants of Kamo had only a minimal involvement in exchange relations: there was no market in the village, taxes were paid almost entirely in kind, and, most important, except for three temple families, every one of the 153 households in the village was landed.¹⁶ Surveys conducted in 1843 (of the 536 koku under the hatamoto) and 1868 (of the 208 koku under the daimyo) revealed that there still was no market in the village and every household was landed. However, in 1843, there were, in the hatamoto's section of the village, two dyers, two carpenters, two sawyers, a cooper, a blacksmith, and two tatami makers. (The presence of the tatami makers is especially interesting, since tatami was by no means a common item in Tokugawa peasant households.)¹⁷ In 1868, the smaller, daimyo-held part of the village had a similar array of artisans: two sawyers, a carpenter, a cooper, a dyer, and three oil pressers. The peasants supplemented their income with day labor, perhaps in part to earn cash to buy the commercial fertilizer that was occasionally used. Finally, the survey reports that the peasants grew some cotton, but it may not have been cultivated commercially.¹⁸ The case of Kamo village illustrates that even in areas where subsistence agriculture was still dominant, the peasants were involved to some extent in market relations, evidently on an increasing scale.

¹⁵ Nomura Kanetarō, *Mura meisaichō no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Yūhikaku, 1949), contains an extensive collection of village surveys (*mura meisaichō*) and reports on nonagricultural by-employments (*nōkan योगよ or nōkan akinai*), taken mostly from the Kantō region. As Nomura stressed repeatedly (see pp. 35–6), the documents must be used with caution because they were compiled only in response to specific inquiries from higher authorities, usually on the occasion of a fief transferal or a tour of inspection by bakufu officials. The best surveys are intricate accounts of the characteristics of the villages. The worst are verbatim repetitions of older surveys.

¹⁶ 'Kamo mura meisaichō' [1793], *Chiba ken shiryō: kinsei hen Awa no kuni*, vol. 2, pp. 360–5.

¹⁷ See Susan B. Hanley, 'The Material Culture: Stability in Transition', in Jansen and Rozman, *Japan in Transition*, pp. 447–70.

¹⁸ 'Kamo mura sashidashi meisaichō' [1843] and 'Kamo mura murakagamichō' [1868], *Chiba ken shiryō: kinsei hen Awa no kuni*, vol. 2, pp. 366–71, 371–8.

Elite Response to Village Decline

During the period leading up to the Bunsei Reforms of 1827, the bakufu tried to establish better control over the Kantō region, which was divided into such a complex mix of fudai daimyo, hatamoto, bakufu, and temple holdings that in extreme cases a single village could be divided among three, four, even eight or nine different fiefholders. It established an inspectorate-general for the Kantō (the *Kantō torishimari deyaku*), which organized local villages into mutually responsible groups of several to several dozen each, regardless of their nominal overlords, in much the way families were grouped within the villages.¹⁹ One aspect of this policy was to require officials to submit reports on peasant by-employments. The bakufu was especially concerned with curtailing the growth of pawn shops, bath houses, saloons (*izakaya*), and other establishments that did not serve what it saw as the best interests of the peasants. Originally, the authorities tried to restrict, but not actually prohibit, commercial activity in the villages. At the time of the Tenpō Reforms of the 1840s, however, the bakufu issued ineffective orders to close down businesses 'unbecoming' to peasants.²⁰ An examination of these reports shows that a significant number of peasants—at least 20 to 25 percent, according to one estimate²¹—were involved in nonagricultural, commercial activities (not including handicrafts). For example, the document submitted by Amatsu, a village in Awa with an assessed yield of 612 koku, reveals that of 833 total households, sixty-two were engaged solely in agriculture, 457 combined agriculture and fishing, and 314—about 38 percent—combined agriculture and some type of commerce. There was not a single saloon, but there were twelve hairdressers and eight bath houses in the village, which probably indicates that grimy fishermen from other villages frequented the area.²² In Hachiman village, Kazusa, in 1847,

¹⁹ See Michiko Tanaka, 'Village Youth Organizations (*Wakamono Nakama*) in Late Tokugawa Politics and Society' (Unpublished PhD. dissertation, Princeton University, 1982), esp. pp. 202–37; also Kitahara Susumu, 'Minshū no seikatsu to shakai', *Rekishi kōron* 1:1 (December 1975), pp. 46–58.

²⁰ Compare a typical Bunsei injunction, ('Nōkan shōnin shichitori toseimono kakiage ikken shorui' [1828]) and one from the Tenpō period ('Naraiharu mura nōkan akinai tosei torishirabe ikken shorui' [1843]) in *Chiba ken shiryō: kinsei hen Awa no kuni*, vol. 2, pp. 225–6 and 40–2.

²¹ Nomura, *Mura meisaichō no kenkyū*, pp. 113–16, based on an analysis of forty-three villages.

²² 'Amatsu mura nōkan akinai tosei no mono namae narabini shichitori kindaka torishirabegaki' [1827], *Chiba ken shiryō: kinsei hen Awa no kuni*, vol. 2, pp. 218–25.

128 of 325 households (about 43 percent) pursued commercial activities in addition to agriculture. Hachiman, a village of 1,253 koku administered by eight hatamoto and bakufu intendants (*daikan*), boasted eight saloons, two sake wholesalers, four bath houses, three hairdressers, two inns, twenty-eight grain dealers, twenty-two purveyors of dry goods, six candy and prepared-food sellers, and two druggists—but no restaurants or umbrella makers.²³

The bakufu was eager to control commercial activity because it seemed to contribute to moral decline. An order sent to Sakamoto village, Awa, in 1827 stated that, 'merchants leave their fields untilled and, moreover, indulge in luxuries and so cause hardship to the good folk [*ryōmin*] of the village.'²⁴ As part of the Bunsei Reforms, the bakufu issued a long set of injunctions calling on village officials to report the roving groups of gamblers and bandits—including both homeless peasants and masterless samurai—that were threatening village society.²⁵ The most likely explanation for this rise in disorder is that the gamblers and thieves were peasants who had left their home villages in search of wage labor only to find that life in town was little better than home, whereupon they fell in with masterless samurai and other ruffians. The peasants in this case were not necessarily desperately poor; they merely did not perceive a relative improvement in their livelihoods as a result of the move from village to town.

The concern shown by the bakufu authorities was understandable. Their attribution of social ills to moral decay reflects the strong cultural and institutional roots of agriculture in Tokugawa society. Agriculture, to them, was more than simply a source of tax revenue or a way to keep the peasants busy, it was the foundation of the nation. In their eyes, moral decline was the only logical explanation for the widespread commercialization of the rural economy. (Of course, officials could idealize farming because they did not have to do it themselves.)

No one can say what the peasants, who did have to farm, thought about the matter, but they were profoundly affected by the new economic order. Peasant society changed, as relations of economic

Nomura, *Mura meisaichō no kenkyū*, p. 117, notes that bath houses and hairdressers were found most frequently in post towns and other transportation centers.

²³ 'Nōkan akinai tosei torishirabe no gi ni tsuki Hachiman mura hoka jūyonkason kumiai kakiagechō', *Chiba ken shiryō: kinsei hen Kazusa no kuni*, vol. 2, pp. 10–31.

²⁴ 'Sashiagemōsu issatsu no koto' [1827], *Chiba ken shiryō: kinsei hen Awa no kuni*, vol. 2, p. 228.

²⁵ Tanaka, 'Village Youth Organizations', pp. 272–309, contains a partial translation of the injunctions. Tanaka stated (p. 273) that the injunctions with commentary had not yet been published in Japanese; actually, a copy can be found in *Tōgane shi shi: shiryōhen*, ed. Tōgane shi (Chiba: Tōgane shi, 1976), vol. 1, pp. 583–624.

dependency—between landlord and tenant, creditor and debtor, employer and employee—appeared. Peasants on both sides of those relationships found themselves looking beyond the village for markets and jobs. Economic diversity compromised forever the social insularity—whether nurturing or stifling—of the peasant community.

The bakufu was not alone in its alarm over the social crisis apparently caused by the growth of commercial activity in the eastern Kantō region. Many village officials and wealthy peasants (*gōnō*) tried also to alleviate rural difficulties. Unfortunately, economic historians concerned with structural transformation often portray elites in a passive role, almost waiting for things to sort themselves out into 'normal' landlord-tenant relations so they can get on with their historical mission of exploitation. Scholars have yet to interpret persuasively and document the intentions of village elites during the three-quarters of a century of decline and subsequent resurgence.

The evidence is frequently ambiguous. In a review article on the village desolation problem, Suda Shigeru discussed the case of Minami Oyumi village (now in Chiba city) in Shimōsa.²⁶ In 1816, the peasants of the village complained of suffering from fifty years of hardship, during which the population fell precipitously as large numbers of peasants left the area. Some 370 of the village's 1,027 koku assessed yield was left uncultivated as a result. Enter Shinozaki Yahei, the chief headman (*warimoto*) responsible for Minami Oyumi and neighboring villages, who lent the village 300 ryō and a tract of land. The villagers agreed to give Yahei 20 bales of rice annually in addition to 7.5 percent annual interest on 100 ryō of the loan.²⁷ The principal of the loan was to be used to relieve the immediate hardship of the village. In addition, 2.5 ryō of the annual interest payment was to be automatically returned to the village as a ten-year, interest-free loan. This money was to be used for low-interest loans to villagers in need. The other 5 ryō of interest was to be paid to Yahei's daughter as a living allowance. Yahei apparently made the loan to the village in return for assurances from the villagers that his family line would never be allowed to die out or fall into serious economic distress.

²⁶ Suda Shigeru, 'Kinsei kōki Jōsō nōson ni okeru botsuraku nōmin', *Chihōshi kenkyū* 163 (February 1980), p. 14.

²⁷ Suda, *ibid.*, erroneously placed the interest at 7.75 percent. Compare the original document, 'Murakata sōzoku no gi ni tsuki Minami Oyumi mura sōbyakushō torikiwamegaki', *Chiba ken shiryō: kinsei hen Shimōsa no kuni*, vol. 2, pp. 9–13, especially p. 10. Moreover, Suda (p. 14) implied that the interest was charged against the entire 300 ryō, but the original document (pp. 9–10) distinctly states that interest would be charged against only 100 ryō.

From a series of documents concerning misuse of the loan by village officials in 1835, however, it appears that the land donated by Yahei was tenanted, while the only people able to borrow money from the fund set up by Yahei were peasants with relatively large holdings who needed money to hire agricultural wage labor, which had become expensive as marginal peasants left the village in search of better conditions elsewhere. Indeed, there is evidence that Yahei was put up to making the loan by officials of the Oyumi domain, who were concerned about a decrease in the number of peasants available for corvée labor.²⁸ In other words, the domain was anxious to help marginal peasants, but only because it realized that once the villagers left the land they were unlikely ever to come back. In this respect, the Oyumi domain's policy was identical to the bakufu's establishment of the inspectorate-general for the Kantō in 1827.

Yahei's case is an excellent example of the ambiguous position of many village elites. He was acting out of self-interest, but that self-interest coincided, or at least overlapped with the interests of both the community at large and the domain. The same could be said of local elites who sponsored the activities of preachers of Shingaku²⁹ and similar philosophies in the countryside or who promoted agrarian reform. Helen Hardacre has described a salt merchant in Bizen province (present-day Okayama prefecture) who used his fortune to promote Kurozumikyō among local peasants.³⁰ Hasegawa Shinzō has discussed attempts by officials and wealthy villagers in the Shimodate domain (Hitachi province) and Mōka bakufu territory (Shimotsuke province) during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to propagate Shingaku philosophy among the peasants.³¹ In Shimodate, domain officials, with the financial aid of a local cotton merchant, brought in Shingaku preachers to establish a school in the castle town in 1792. According to Hasegawa, the daimyo was concerned about an apparent rise in infanticide since the Tenmei famine of the 1780s, while the merchant was worried that the depopulation of the villages would

²⁸ Hoya Naomi, 'Minami Oyumi mura: haishakukin to nanushi tsuikyū ikken ni tsuite' and *id.*, 'Minami Oyumi mura Tenpō 6-nen haishakukin o meguru deiri ni tsuite', unpub. mss. (n.p. [Tokyo], 1985). I wish to thank Luke Roberts of Princeton University for bringing Hoya's work to my attention.

²⁹ See Robert N. Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion* (New York: The Free Press, 1957), for a detailed discussion of Shingaku and its founder, Ishida Baigan.

³⁰ Helen Hardacre, 'Creating State Shintō: The Great Promulgation Campaign and the New Religions', *Journal of Japanese Studies* 12:1 (Winter 1986), pp. 29-64, esp. pp. 37-40.

³¹ Hasegawa Shinzō, 'Kita Kantō nōson no kōhai to nōminsō', *Ronshū Kantō kinseishi no kenkyū*, ed. Murakami Tadashi (Tokyo: Meicho shuppan, 1984), pp. 266-77.

cut off supplies of raw materials. In the Mōka area Shingaku preachers started coming at the invitation of the local intendant in 1794. In 1802, a school was set up in Oda village on the initiative of the village headman. Hasegawa noted that the school proved particularly popular among peasants with moderate landholdings (seven to fifteen koku) who had at least part of their land mortgaged to pawnbrokers.

Infanticide was a moral problem often singled out by elites concerned with the origins of village decline. This concern is reflected in a tract on population control in Tomida village, Kazusa, written several years before the Meiji Restoration. The author was probably the village headman, Ōtaka Zenbei (1822–1894), who gained some repute for his crusade against the practice.³² He found that the population of Tomida had dropped from about 1,000 at the end of the seventeenth century to 517 in 1852, the result, he felt, of infanticide. In 1854, twenty-six children were born in the village, of whom exactly half survived and half died in infancy. But he noted that ten of the fourteen children who would eventually succeed to the heads of their households survived, while only three of twelve daughters and younger sons lived. Of these numbers he commented:

[On eldest sons] If money for medicine had been made available [by the bakufu] during the mother's pregnancy or during the infant's illness, or if the parents had been taught the importance of caring for young children, two or three probably would have survived.

[On daughters and younger sons] It is said that two or three of the children became sick and died during infancy, and six were stillborn or died soon after birth—but who can say what really happened? Again, if the parents had been carefully taught how important it is to raise their children, seven or eight of them surely would have lived.

[On the younger children who lived] These are the children of parents who understood and obeyed our teachings.³³

The author then continued with a plea for money for education programs, smallpox vaccination, and aid to marginal peasants who might be driven to infanticide by perceived economic necessity. Specifically, he estimated the total number of births for the 120 villages in Musha county in 1855 to be 987, of whom 494 infants probably lived

³² [Ōtaka Zenbei], 'Kazusa no kuni Musha gun Tomida mura, taka, iekazu, ninbetsu, shōni umaredaka torishirabechō', *Kinsei jinkō mondai shiryō*, comp. Honjō Eijirō (Osaka: Seibundō, 1971). Zenbei came from a major land-holding family that was also involved in sake brewing. See 'Ōtaka Zenbei', *Chiba daihyakka jiten* (Chiba: Chiba nippōsha, 1978), p. 112.

³³ 'Kazusa no kuni Musha gun Tomida mura, taka, iekazu, ninbetsu, shōni umaredaka torishirabechō', *Kinsei jinkō mondai shiryō*, pp. 5–6.

and 493 died. Of the 493 estimated deaths, he thought at least 427 were preventable: 244 by a combination of material aid and education on hygiene and the evils of infanticide for the parents, and 183 through education alone.³⁴

The moralistic attempts by elites to deal with the crisis may be seen as a cynical attempt at indoctrination by a ruling class afraid of losing its control over the peasantry. A better interpretation is to give the elites credit for believing that the core values of obedience, frugality, and hard work stressed by the philosophies popular at the time³⁵ applied equally to landlords and tenants, while at the same time recognizing their anxiety over the consequences of the diversification of the local economy. If the peasants had to be encouraged to work hard at agriculture, it must mean they had some alternative to farming, such as handicrafts, commercial activity, or wage labor. Much of the decline of Kantō villages may in fact have been the shift of landless or nearly landless peasants (who, because they were not full members of the village [*honbyakushō*], were not directly obliged to pay land taxes) away from agriculture in favor of more attractive activities connected with the market. Village elites tried to forestall the shift, especially if they still had a major economic commitment to the preservation of subsistence agriculture. Core values served to affirm the importance of the agricultural order—and its elites—during the process of structural transformation.

Wealthy peasants who had made a successful transition to commercial activities could establish social prominence by extending material aid to less fortunate villagers, without necessarily needing to fall back on moral suasion to reinforce their position. An example of this sort is Kihei, a fertilizer wholesaler who brought a measure of economic stability to the villages near the Pacific coast of Shimōsa province in the 1840s and 1850s by providing employment to local peasants, whom he hired to transport fertilizer inland, and by temporarily taking over the operations of sardine-net owners who had fallen on hard times, thus ensuring the continued employment of local fishermen.³⁶

Ōtaka Zenbei, the headman of Tomida village, took a pragmatic approach couched in moralistic terms in a proposal he wrote around

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11. The figures themselves are not accurate, since, as Zenbei explains (p. 11), he merely extrapolated the statistics for his home village (p. 4), where thirteen of twenty-six children died, five unavoidably, eight by suspected infanticide.

³⁵ See Hardacre, 'Creating State Shintō', p. 40.

³⁶ Shinomaru Tomohiko, 'Shimōsa no zaigō shōnin—kinsei kōki Kujukurihama no hoshika o torihiki shite daitō shita', *Bōsō chihōshi*, ed. Chihōshi kenkyū kyōgikai (Tokyo: Yūzankaku, 1973), pp. 187–208, esp. pp. 187–95.

1860, evidently for the Kantō inspector-general.³⁷ Zenbei blamed his village's difficulties on the commercialization of agriculture and the emergence of a demand for luxuries. His proposal went through a long list of commodities, including tea, tobacco, miso, shōyu, vinegar, clothing and geta, with a discussion of the origins of each problem and a suggested solution. The problem—peasants buying what they once made for themselves—and the solution—placing such a high tax on the commodities that they become unprofitable for merchants—was essentially the same for every commodity. For example, regarding tea, he complained:

In recent years the number of tea merchants has increased steadily, which has naturally fostered luxurious ways among the peasants. A growing number of them have taken to wasting money on things like building tea houses in an elaborate style—something once quite unknown in the countryside—so they can perform the tea ceremony. Until about a hundred years ago [i.e., the 1760s] all the farmers planted tea plants on the levies between their fields. They drank much of the tea and sold whatever was left over. But then the tea merchants came selling high-grade tea. Now the villagers buy the high-grade tea and will not grow their own. Tea plants have virtually disappeared from the levies, which has caused a number of disputes over land boundaries.³⁸

Zenbei went on to suggest that the tea merchants be required to pay a fee to assist desperate villagers. Once they do so, 'they will readily see the error of their ways and return to farming [*kaishin kinō*], and the number of tea gardens in the villages will increase.'³⁹

Zenbei estimated the annual expenditure of the average household for commodities and services. The figures themselves are probably good only as a general guide, as there is no way of knowing how they were calculated. But the very fact that Zenbei chose this approach to analyzing the problem is instructive. The total came to just over 7 ryō per family, or several months' wages for an artisan.⁴⁰ They were as follows: geta, 1 shu (one shu equalled one-fourth bu, or one-sixteenth ryō) per family member; tea, 2 shu; vinegar, 1 bu; sweets and tobacco, 2

³⁷ 'Hyakushōdomo konkyū ni satoshisōrō shimatsusho', *Kinsei jinkō mondai shiryō*, pp. 51–78.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 51–2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁴⁰ As part of the Tenpō Reforms, the peasants of Naraiharu village, Shimōsa, were ordered to lower wages and prices by 10 to 15 percent. Artisans were to get 1 bu (one-fourth ryō) for nine days' work, which translates to 252 days' work for 7 ryō. ('Naraiharu mura nōkan akinai tosei torishirabe ikken shorui' [1843], *Chiba ken shiryō: kinsei hen Awa no kuni*, vol. 2, pp. 40–2). Even allowing for the artificially low level of the officially mandated wages and inflation between 1842 and 1860, 7 ryō was a considerable sum.

bu each; miso, shōyu, eating out, and pawnbrokerage fees, 1 ryō each; and clothing, 1 ryō 2 bu.

Zenbei advocated paying allowances to people in need of help. He proposed a five-item aid package for people in Musha county (120 villages). He called for payments of 2 bu each to 244 people in need of medicine and living allowances, for a total of 124 ryō. Next was an allowance of 1 shu each for the 987 people in need of smallpox inoculation, for a total of 61 ryō 2 bu 3 shu. Third was a payment of 2 ryō to each of the 368 households in the county (about 4 percent of the total population) that were too poor to raise their children adequately, for a total of 536 ryō. Fourth was an allowance of 2 ryō for orphans, the elderly, and others without family support. He estimated that approximately 2 percent of the households, or about 130 for the county, fell into this category, and thus budgeted 260 ryō for this item. Finally, he proposed that 30 ryō be set aside to pay doctors 1 bu per day to examine pregnant women two or three times a year. The total aid package amounted to just over 1,000 ryō per annum. He proposed that merchants and wealthy peasants be forced to pay for these allowances. This would raise 3,000 ryō from the well-to-do (on which 450 ryō interest could be earned on loans to moneylenders), plus 600 ryō from the 300 pawnbrokers in the county, 150 ryō from the seventeen shōyu brewers, and 6 ryō from the six vinegar manufacturers, in addition to another 40 ryō levied on merchants according to the scale of their operations. Thus, of a total of 4,411 ryō, 3,000 ryō would be put on deposit with moneylenders, just over 1,000 ryō distributed as living allowances, and the rest lent to villagers interest-free.⁴¹

It is unclear whether the authorities acted on Zenbei's recommendations, but the proposal itself is at least as important as the result. Zenbei clearly would have liked a return to the good old days of a subsistence economy (despite the fact that his family was involved in sake brewing), but he was enough of a realist to understand that that would not happen. So he chose the next best thing, that is, to advocate that the merchants pay to alleviate some of the problems their activities had caused.

In the next section the discussion will shift from Chiba to Todoroku village in the northern Kantō province of Shimotsuke, where the bakufu took an approach similar to Zenbei's by calling in the agrarian reformer Ninomiya Sontoku (1787–1856) as a consultant to help with the revival of villages near Nikkō.

⁴¹ 'Kazusa no kuni, Musha gun, Tomida mura, taka, iekazu, ninbetsu shōni umaredaka torishirabegaki', *Kinsei jinkō mondai shiryō*, pp. 13–17.

Todoroku Village and Ninomiya Sontoku

Life was never easy in the Shimotsuke village of Todoroku, assessed at 211 koku. The 120 residents of the community in the foothills near Nikkō relied on dry-field farming and lumber for their living. Todoroku, like villages throughout the area, was in an especially sorry state in the mid-nineteenth century. Conditions were so bad that in 1853 the bakufu called in Ninomiya Sontoku to try to reverse the decline of eighty-nine villages in the area. Although Sontoku died in 1856, his work was continued through 1866 by his son and disciples, who promoted a program of self-help through a combination of a hierarchical work ethic and improved agricultural technology that was apparently successful in bringing wasteland back into productivity in Todoroku.⁴²

Todoroku's location in a poor, mountainous region, with virtually no rice cultivation, ironically made the residents there reliant on money from the early Tokugawa period because of their need to pay taxes in cash. As early as 1634 all but a tiny fraction of the tax burden was commuted.⁴³ Because the village was ill suited to agriculture (over half the arable in the village was rated 'inferior' [*gehata*]), the peasants supplemented their incomes with work in the local lumber industry, as lumberjacks, lumber wholesalers, or as workers on the rafts that carried timber to Edo via the Kinu and Tone rivers. A number of residents, particularly village officials, were active in the lumber wholesalers' association (*uriki ton'ya kabunakama*), as well as in disputes with similar groups in the area.⁴⁴ In addition, peasants in villages in the surrounding area, and perhaps those in Todoroku as well, produced charcoal and grew lacquer trees, tobacco, and some cotton,⁴⁵ which provided additional income.

On the eve of the Tenmei famine, conditions in Todoroku were much like those elsewhere in the Kantō, with conflicting signs of a rising standard of living and village decline. A set of injunctions sent to the

⁴² Sontoku's collected works, *Ninomiya Sontoku zenshū*, 36 vols, ed. Ninomiya Sontoku igyō sen'yōkai (repr. ed. Tokyo: Ryūkei shosha, 1977 [1927-1931]), is, of course, the most complete account of his life and philosophy. See also the biography by Sasai Shintarō, *Ninomiya Sontoku den*, 8th ed. (Tokyo: Nihon hyōronsha, 1940), and Iwasaki Toshio's study of Sontoku's work in the Sōma domain in the Tōhoku region, *Ninomiya Sontoku shihō no kenkyū: Sōma han o chūshin to shite*, Kokugaku kenkyū sōsho 2 (Tokyo: Kinseisha, 1970).

⁴³ 'Todoroku mura nengu waritsukejō' [1634], *Tochigi ken shi: shiryōhen*, ed. Tochigi ken shi hensan iinkai (Utsunomiya: Tochigi ken, 1977), vol. 14 (*kinsei* 6), p. 243.

⁴⁴ See the series of documents in *ibid.*, pp. 281-304.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 270-80.

village by the bakufu magistrate (*bugyō*) in charge of Nikkō warned peasants not to sell lumber in Edo or other domains without permission, not to sell cotton cloth or thread at the market at Chūzenji without prior approval, not to take lessons in swordsmanship from masterless samurai (*rōnin*) under any circumstances, and not to wear expensive clothing or hold celebrations on an excessive scale. At the same time, the peasants were urged to devote their efforts to agriculture and not to let fields lie fallow. The magistrate also said that while it was permissible for younger sons to leave the village to work temporarily as indentured servants, the peasants were under no circumstances to leave if it meant abandoning one's house and fields.⁴⁶

Interpretation of this document depends heavily on one's assessment of peasants' reasons for abandoning the farm and on how seriously one takes sumptuary laws in general. Silk-clad peasants living it up on expensive food and sake every night after fencing lessons would have little reason to give up their land in favor of becoming indentured servants. On the other hand, there were clearly a number of economic factors in and around the village that made it desirable, if not necessary, to neglect agriculture.

Clear evidence of crisis can be found in the village records. In 1814, more than one-third—77 koku—of Todoroku's total assessed yield of 211 koku had gone out of cultivation and only twenty-two of thirty-one households (excluding the village headman, who was exempt) were capable of providing corvée labor.⁴⁷ Things were not much better in later decades. In 1824, 59 koku was left uncultivated; in 1837, perhaps because of the Tenpō famine, the figure rose to 83 koku. In 1853, it was back down to 59 koku, but that accounted for nearly half the total arable (21 of 46 chō).⁴⁸ Some of the land went out of cultivation because the families who owned it died out.⁴⁹ Probably the children of many marginal peasants simply left home rather than assume the burden of cultivating unproductive land. In addition, the peasants of Todoroku cultivated only a portion of their holdings. An 1822 record of land

⁴⁶ 'Murakata torishimari ni tsuki Todoroku mura sōbyakushō ukegaki' [1782], *ibid.*, pp. 401–2.

⁴⁷ 'Todoroku mura tsuburekoku kakiagechō' [1814], *ibid.*, pp. 368–70.

⁴⁸ 'Todoroku mura shūmon aratamechō' [1824], *ibid.*, pp. 371–8; 'Todoroku mura shūmon aratamechō' [1837], *ibid.*, pp. 378–85; 'Todoroku mura shūmon aratamechō' [1853], *ibid.*, pp. 385–9; 'Todoroku mura arahata ninbetsu umakazu kakiagechō' [1852] *ibid.*, pp. 395–6.

⁴⁹ 'Tsubure hyakushō toritate nin tsuki Todoroku mura murayakunin negaigaki' [1817], *ibid.*, pp. 398–9.

holdings for seven households reveals that only 126 of 140 individual plots were actually under cultivation.⁵⁰

The Nikkō magistrate appointed Ninomiya and his followers to help Todoroku and eighty-eight other villages in the area in 1853. They were apparently successful in reversing the decline of Todoroku, bringing nearly all of the fallow land back into cultivation and reestablishing four defunct households, all without any financial aid from the bakufu. Their basic policy was to help peasants rebuild houses, reopen wasteland, improve roads and irrigation systems, and enter commercial forestry. They gave money to the needy and rewarded the virtuous.⁵¹

Well-to-do peasants were sometimes the beneficiaries of Sontoku's philanthropy. In 1857, the headman of Todoroku, Goemon, presented a petition to Ninomiya Sontoku's son, who by this time was in charge of rebuilding the village, asking that his twenty-five-year-old son be named head of an 11 koku household that had died out some forty years earlier.⁵² Goemon explained that he had in fact been born into that household, which had once been among the leading families of the village, and was later adopted into the headman's house. Since Sontoku and his disciples had come to help Todoroku rebuild, he felt it was an excellent opportunity to reestablish the old household with his son at its head, but he could do so only with financial help. Sontoku's son obliged with an award of 10 ryō to build a house and 4 koku of rice to live on until the son could get settled.

Goemon's household was in no immediate danger of collapsing. His holdings had risen from 5.8 koku in 1824 to 11.4 koku in 1837, where they remained in 1854. As village headman Goemon was exempt from corvée obligations, and he was an active member of the lumber wholesalers' association.⁵³ From this case, it appears that new households were created by members of established families, rather than by returning villagers. If so, Sontoku's policy was successful because it gave relatively well-to-do peasants the financial leeway to expand their holdings of land for commercial agriculture or forestry, while providing

⁵⁰ 'Todoroku mura tahata meisaichō' [1822], *ibid.*, pp. 391-5.

⁵¹ See Sasai, *Ninomiya Sontoku den*, pp. 433-65.

⁵² 'Nikkō goshinryō Todoroku mura tsubureshiki toritate negaigaki narabi ni mōshiwatashi ukegaki torishirabechō' [1857], *Ninomiya Sontoku zenshū*, vol. 28, pp. 922-4.

⁵³ 'Todoroku mura shūmon aratamechō' [1824], *Tochigi ken shi: shiryōhen*, vol. 14 (*kinsei* 6), pp. 373-8; 'Todoroku mura shūmon aratamechō' [1837], *ibid.*, pp. 378-85; 'Todoroku mura shūmon aratamechō' [1854], *ibid.*, pp. 385-91; 'Shinryōgumi uriki nakama kitei narabi ni renmeichō' [1837], *ibid.*, pp. 301-3.

poorer villagers with a financial incentive to remain on the land, either as commercial farmers or in some sort of relationship with wealthier peasants.

Ninomiya Sontoku and his son succeeded in Todoroku in part because they understood the inevitability of market relations. The bakufu's initial policy, revealed in the Bunsei and Tenpō injunctions, was to outlaw commercial activity and, failing that, to curtail further growth. It could do that, albeit with little success, only because it assumed that the peasants shared its ideology of the primacy of agriculture in the social order.

Ôtaka Zenbei and Ninomiya Sontoku, however, realized that it was not enough merely to tell a peasant to stop acting like a merchant; it was necessary to give him material incentives to stay in farming and out of business. They realized further that since some commercial activity was inevitable, farmers should be encouraged to be on the profitable end of it by growing cash crops like tea and lumber. They reinforced their practical programs with a philosophy that taught that hard work, frugality, and filial piety were essential to individual success and happiness, and not only social stability. Ultimately, however, the efforts of elites like Ninomiya Sontoku and Ôtaka Zenbei were effective in patching scattered wounds in the system and not in curing the disease. That would have taken a major overhaul of the methods of tax collection and social control, something that was not forthcoming until after the Meiji Restoration.

Conclusion

Despite a generally rising standard of living, villages in the Kantō area were faced with a crisis during the decades leading up to the Meiji Restoration. The crisis came about because marginal peasants found alternatives to an inadequate system of subsistence agriculture, such as wage labor, by-employments, and cultivation of cash crops. Villagers who owned more land than they could cultivate with family labor alone found it increasingly difficult to afford wage labor to work the extra land. Bakufu and domain officials were alarmed at the rising number of fields that were allowed to go untilled and untaxed.

The peasantry underwent the first stages of differentiation, as some peasants became completely separated from the means of production and the others became dependent on the market—to sell their wares, to get money to buy food and materials, or to pay laborers to work the

land. Participation in production for the market offered wonderful opportunities, but the stakes were high. A subsistence farmer might be able to adjust production to the needs of his family or weather a bad year while retaining the land and tools needed for the following year's crop, but a peasant who owned too little land to feed his family found himself at the mercy of unforgiving market forces.

Peasant participation in the market and the problems associated with it were by no means limited to the Kantō, although the Kantō is the only area where village decline was seen as a major social problem by contemporary authorities. The sudden emergence of an enormous market in Edo before the economy of the hinterland had developed fully (in contrast to the Kinai region, where both the major cities and the countryside developed more gradually) may have accentuated the crisis in the Kantō. This conclusion is supported by the coincidence of the onset of village decline in the early eighteenth century and the shift in the economic center of gravity from Osaka to Edo after the recoinage and inflation of the Genroku period (1688–1704).⁵⁴

The impact of late Tokugawa economic change on modern Japan is at the heart of the debate between optimists and pessimists that has dominated the literature on nineteenth-century socioeconomic history. The consensus view is that,

[T]he more market forces penetrated into rural economic life, the more wage labor was supplied from the farming sector, whether in the form of a paid job at home, going out to work on a temporary basis (*dekasegi*), or leaving the farm with one's family. This presumed relationship is often associated with the view that Japan's industrialization in its early stages was able to tap a reservoir of surplus labor in the countryside, a surplus resulting from farm fragmentation and other forces that drove peasants into tenancy.⁵⁵

This argument suffers from two major faults. First is the idea of a causal linear relationship between the penetration of the market and the growth of things like commercial agriculture, by-employment, and wage labor. This approach makes sense only if the market is seen as something alien to village life, something that grew only because it was imposed by an outside force. It is far more logical to turn the relationship around—the more peasants responded to demand for commercial agricultural products, or handicrafts, or wage laborers, the more deeply the villages became involved in the market economy. The

⁵⁴ Nakai Nobuhiko, 'Kinsei toshi no hatten', *Iwanami kōza Nihon rekishi* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1963), vol. 11 (*kinsei* 3), pp. 36–100.

⁵⁵ As summarized by Saitō, 'The Rural Economy', pp. 400–1, who critiques this view for his own reasons.

second fault lies in the notion of a reservoir of surplus labor in the countryside. A look at contemporary documents reveals that the surplus-labor thesis is not valid. Wage labor was already expensive in the late eighteenth century and became more so during the following decades.⁵⁶ Moreover, the labor-surplus thesis is predicated on an idea of rural underemployment (i.e., a shortage of land) that uses landholding size as the only significant measure of peasant livelihoods; a better approach would be to view tenancy, commercial agriculture, by-employments, and wage work as so many strategies for survival for people who could not (or would not) live off of subsistence farming alone—strategies that could be mixed and matched as necessary. The emergence of opportunities for industrial labor and the continuation of agriculture were not mutually exclusive issues for poor peasant families; rather, industrial wage labor augmented, or at times replaced, existing strategies for survival. For example, when textile mills opened, tenant farmers did not themselves become factory workers. Instead, they sent their daughters, who otherwise may have worked at home weaving or spinning or outside as domestic servants.

A critical point is that widespread production for the market irrevocably alters the fabric of village society. The adoption of market-oriented survival strategies led to a dependency on the market that could not be picked up or discarded at will. In other words, the critical distinction is not between agricultural and nonagricultural pursuits, but rather between production for subsistence and production for the market.⁵⁷ Osamu Saitō rightly questioned the surplus-labor thesis, but he missed this important point. He placed great importance on his finding that 'cash cropping acted as a brake on the tendency for small farm households to become nonfarm households',⁵⁸ when in fact he should have been looking at the pull of opportunities for cash cropping

⁵⁶ For example, a 1790 document from Shimōsa complains of generally high prices, 'particularly wages for seasonal male and female servants, day laborers, and artisans', at a time when artisans were paid 1 bu for twelve or thirteen days' work and male agricultural day laborers 100 mon per day (about 1 bu for sixteen days' work). ('Shoshiki nedan no gi ni tsuki Gogōnai mura hoka muramura ren'inchō' [1790], *Chiba ken shiryō: kinsei hen Shimōsa no kuni*, vol. 1, pp. 189–90.) By the Tenpō Reforms, artisans were ordered to lower wages to 1 bu for six or seven days' work. ('Shoakinaimono narabi ni shoshokunin temachin nesage kakiagechō' [1840], *ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 326–8.) Laborers hired by Ninomiya Sontoku were paid 200 mon plus 1.25 shō (2.41 liters) of rice per day. ('Horibushin ninsoku chingin fuchimai torishirabe kakiagechō' [1856], *Ninomiya Sontoku zenshū*, vol. 28, pp. 730–1.)

⁵⁷ This is, of course, the major premise of the substantivist school (to use Philip C. C. Huang's term), represented by James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

⁵⁸ Saitō, 'The Rural Economy', p. 416.

or nonfarm employment—that is, market-oriented activities—on subsistence farmers. After all, the various forms of market-oriented production had the same goal—to get money to pay taxes or rent and buy food, shelter, and clothing. Self-sufficient farmers were in a totally different situation, since they had to produce for themselves nearly every necessity of life, not just food. The tenant farmer's daughter who wove, spun, worked in a factory, or otherwise contributed to the household economy would have been a burden—and a possible victim of infanticide—in a marginal, subsistence farmer's family.

The bakufu officials and local elites who showed such alarm at the commercialization of the countryside realized that their fates were tied to the myth of a subsistence-agriculture economy. Markets had existed long before the Tokugawa bakufu's establishment—and had grown considerably since. And so long as commercialization remained firmly under the supervision of the state, social stability was assured. But the only way to maintain such control was for the vast majority of peasants to remain on the land cultivating rice and a few other sanctioned commodities. Once the peasants started taking up businesses that benefited themselves or other peasants, but not the state, the authorities had cause for alarm. Land that lay fallow went off the tax rolls; peasants not resident in their village of registration were free from the supervision of the state. Moreover, farmers alienated from the land (for whatever reasons) had little reason to remain in the villages. Only when peasants felt they had a stake in the community could the bakufu feel secure. It was only natural, then, for the authorities to try to forestall change, but because the Tokugawa state lacked institutional flexibility, and could react to change but not adapt to it, it was doomed to failure.