



**Review: [Untitled]**

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*Peasant Protest in Japan, 1590-1884* by Herbert P. Bix  
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makes a great poet great, in terms of Ch'an, and not to define a tradition as such.

There are other places in the translations where one could quibble over various points, but I think the important ones have all been addressed here.

**Peasant Protest in Japan, 1590-1884** by *Herbert P. Bix*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986. Pp. xxxix + 296. \$30.00.

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Few American Japanologists are likely to recognize the history they have long studied in Herbert P. Bix's *Peasant Protest in Japan, 1590-1884*, but for Japanese historians, his arguments make perfect sense. In this ambitious and controversial study, Bix has three overriding aims: to counter rosy interpretations of Tokugawa history with a hardnosed look at what was wrong, to give Japanese historians and Marxist historiography a sympathetic hearing, and to make the Japanese experience intelligible to other historians by comparing it to protest in Europe, Russia, and Southeast Asia. Feudalism, ground rent, tribute, exploitation, landlordism, contradiction, and class struggle constitute the terms of his discourse. Tracing the economic, social, and political forces that shaped conflict between peasants and their oppressors, he argues that through a tradition of class struggle within the context of Japan's transition from late feudal to early capitalist society, peasants developed their political consciousness to the point where they articulated "man's natural right to the means of production" (p. 186). Even if one does not accept his arguments, his thought-provoking analysis of power relations challenges the benign assumptions heretofore prevailing in the West.

Bix counters conventional English language interpretations of Tokugawa society with one that emphasizes the harshly repressive conditions under which peasants suffered. Having failed in conquest, the Tokugawa state "turned inward and batten[ed] on the peasant population . . . joining economic exploitation and political rule in the same hands" (p. xviii). In other words, this regime deprived the producers not only of their surplus labor but of basic

human freedoms. Furthermore, "the idea that villages were autonomous entities within the fief is a myth created largely by modern historians" (p. xxviii). Instead peasant officials were imposed upon villages, "the internal governance of village communities was consistently authoritarian" (p. xxxi), and through its intermediaries, the village and district officials, ruling authorities intervened unilaterally, effectively, and coercively in village affairs. Even the status system, "with its graded privileges and carefully fostered spirit of discrimination . . . functioned as a mechanism for dividing the peasants from one another so as to be better able to rule them" (p. 5). Only when peasants acted collectively did they force village officials to respond to their interests and needs. The "democratic consensus" that American historians believe to have animated villages never appeared except at times of crisis. Then in risings that pitted peasants against all their oppressors, from unjust peasant officials to exploitative landlords to merchant agents of the state to the state itself, peasants tried to end misrule and assert their right to subsistence.

Of the some three thousand uprisings between 1590, when Toyotomi Hideyoshi unified the country, and 1884, when the Chichibu incident marked the end of an epoch of struggle, Bix has chosen to focus his analysis on case studies of the most famous and violent insurrections. These incidents occurred thirty to fifty years apart, and he switches back and forth between western and central Japan. To sustain his narrative, he compares bakufu and domanial policies that threatened the peasants' livelihood and provides a model of economic development that emphasizes the restrictions placed on commerce by feudal controls. The two go together; the ruling class "promoted petty agricultural production and urban monopolies in trade and manufacturing, but also taxed both quite harshly, thereby driving peasants and merchants into market production" (p. 20). Here again he emphasizes the repressive restrictions that distorted Japan's commercial development but which most American historians have preferred to ignore. The state habitually acted arbitrarily in its extraction of surplus, but when a specific configuration of events forced peasants to recognize the injustice of their exploitation, they rose up in protest.

Almost half of the book is devoted to the eighteenth century, a

time when “the dynamics of economic development were heating up the class struggle” (p. 11). In the Tsuyama domain, site of the 1726–27 Sanchū uprising, exorbitant exactions by the state which took nearly seventy percent of the total harvest had driven a large portion of the peasantry into perpetual debt. Like peasants elsewhere, they had mortgaged their land to better-off landholders, and when they could not redeem it, they sometimes lost part or all of their cultivator’s rights. Furthermore, despite successive years of poor crops, domanial politics drove the reformers to demand increased tribute payments even earlier than usual. Here Bix waxes indignant. “Tokugawa feudal society was an inherently and profoundly unjust society . . . samurai had deprived peasants of political rights, maintained them as mere rice-producing machines, and punished them cruelly for behavior that challenged the samurai way of rule.” Their overriding priority was to keep “peasants in a state of feudal bondage” (p. 29). Under such circumstances, uprisings were inevitable. Yet even when economic exploitation drove the peasants to protest, political domination was so much a part of this exploitation that the issues of feudal political control, particularly questions of who would control the village, were never far from the surface. In Tsuyama the peasants demanded the retraction of tax increases, various kinds of tax exemptions, and the dismissal of all village headmen, deputy headmen (*chūjōya* 中庄屋), and district headmen (*ōjōya* 大庄屋). By calling for the elimination of the very agents who implemented samurai class rule, these demands “must have made the Matsudaira officials realize they were in a life-or-death struggle” (p. 40). This was one struggle the peasants lost; their feudal fetters remained strong.

The process of market development and economic diversification lauded by American historians brought in its train rural impoverishment and greater resistance to the claims of the state. Unlike the 1726–27 Sanchū uprising, the 1761 Ueda riots “weakened irrevocably the foundations of daimyo rule in Ueda” and began the struggles “that would erode the foundations of the bakuhan state itself” (p. 59). There the deepening rift between the castle town and the countryside created by the domanial monopoly over the peasants’ paper production, the repeated struggles of poor peasants against the agents of fief power, the village officials, and the develop-

ment of an antidomianial ideology through a tradition of peasant resistance set the stage for the uprising. The peasants protested for three months (not fifteen as Bix implies on p. 75), and they attacked the property of village headmen, district tribute officers (*wariban* 割番), and rich merchants. Yet this section is chiefly significant for what Bix says about peasant psychology and the beginnings of peasant class consciousness. He makes the important point that for peasants to take direct action, they had to replace ordinary expectations of benevolent treatment with a more critical mode of thinking, a mode that was only possible for “peasants who already had a sense of identity and worth as productive human beings and members of a sustaining community” (p. 68). Although weak and confused, the peasants’ burgeoning class consciousness appeared in statements like, “we wanted to let the samurai do the hard work of peasants and see for themselves how profitable we are” (p. 94). Nevertheless, the peasants were not revolutionaries. Like their counterparts all over the world, their desire was not for a new system but for “the present order with its most disagreeable features softened or eliminated” (p. 92).

By the time of the Tenmei crisis, the growth of a commodity money economy and the new morality of profits deepened splits not only in the peasantry but in the ruling class itself. The phenomenon of the “evil minister” symbolized in bakufu circles by Tanuma Okitsugu (called “forerunner of Modern Japan” in conventional history)<sup>1</sup> was replicated in Fukuyama by Endō Benzō 遠藤弁藏 who also rose from obscurity to a position above his station. Yet while members of the ruling class debated proper conduct among themselves, the existence of evil ministers as targets for the peasants’ wrath meant that demands for the dismissal of subordinate officials deflected their criticism away from the state itself. The result of the 1786–87 uprising was not only to hand the peasants a hollow victory in achieving some of their demands but to enable Abe Masatomo 安部正倫 the fief lord, to launch a reform to redirect peasants into the traditional feudal path. Like the relief measures instituted by the bakufu under the direction of Matsu-

<sup>1</sup> John Whitney Hall, *Tanuma Okitsugu, 1719–1788: Forerunner of Modern Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955).

daira Sadanobu, the reforms in Fukuyama implied a bargain struck between the rural elite of rich peasants and merchants and the ruling class that stabilized daimyo rule and encouraged landlordism and the spread of tenancy relations in the village. In ideological terms, Sadanobu tried to indoctrinate peasants and the poor with attitudes befitting their status, teaching them to respect their superiors, be frugal, diligent, and filial. To a certain extent the reforms succeeded; for fifty years the bakuhan state was free from violent insurrections.

Uprisings are sporadic, but class struggle continues in many different guises as long as unequal economic and political opportunities characterize a given society. According to Bix, Japan's commercial development in the eighteenth century meant that "the division of peasants along economic lines was slowly beginning to override their unity along status lines" (p. 103). In other words, the conditions that historians who seek the origins of Japan's industrial success have discovered in the Tokugawa accumulation of capital are for Bix the source of contradictions and conflict. In their pursuit of haiku poetry, flower arranging, tea ceremony, divination, nationalist learning and the martial arts, the rural elite developed new forms of cultural and ideological expression and managed their own escape from feudal controls. Out of their "deep longing for economic equality and security," (p. 154) the poor turned to deities-in-fashion (*hayarigami* 流行神) and the new religions. Once confirmed in their holdings by the land surveys of the early sixteenth century, peasants thereafter insisted on their inextinguishable right to reclaim pawned land. They furthermore believed that the village community was "an ultimate value for the sake of which the peasants' landholding right existed," that the person and thereby the family had to be preserved "as an object of value," and finally, that "the individual person—as such, and not simply as a member of the family—was an object of value within the confines of the village community" (p. 146). From a notion of rights to land Bix derives a notion of equal human rights. One does not have to go as far as he does, however, to agree that attempts to reconstitute the village community of small freeholders seen in demands for rent reduction and the return of pawned land increasingly dominated peasant protest in the nineteenth century.

Aspirations for *yonaoshi* 世直し (world rectification) and a new social class appeared in protests from the Ōshio Heihachirō insurrection of 1837 to the Chichibu incident of 1884. Although Ōshio planned to help the poor, he found most of his supporters among the rural elite whose tactics of “redemptive killing” were dramatically opposed to the values of the poor.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, in his own person, Ōshio demonstrated how some samurai intellectuals and administrators had become disaffected from the bakuhan system. The implications of the actions the poor took on behalf of themselves went further, however, to threaten the “very pillars on which rested the entire feudal order”: class exploitation in the villages, “domanial exploitation through tributes and corvees, and political controls over production and commerce” (p. 167). In Fukushima and Bushū, in Tsuyama and Shinshū, the poor dropped out of the status system to engage in their own “mass festival of property destruction” (p. 170). These people constituted what Bix, drawing on Sasaki Junnosuke’s terminology, calls the semiproletariat. They “were the propertyless poor who worked for wages . . . and certain landholding peasants whose own minute plots compelled them to earn part-time wages . . . in neighboring towns” (p. 189). Losers in Japan’s economic development, the energy of the poor yet accelerated the dismantling of feudal institutions.

Class strife merely intensified in the Meiji period, for the dismantling of feudalism revealed a new enemy of the poor—the modern state, now firmly allied with the rural and urban bourgeoisie. Here Bix delves into currency problems largely ignored by American historians who laud Japan’s smooth transition to a modern state.<sup>3</sup> In the mountains of Nagano prefecture, Japan’s integration into the world market and the development of commercial capitalism exacerbated the difficulty of dealing with a currency regularly debased since the middle of the eighteenth century. When peasants discovered that the coins they had accumulated in petty manufacturing and trading were worthless at tax collection time, they stormed govern-

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this study, Bix repeatedly and correctly reminds the reader that Japanese rioters attacked property, never persons. Human life was considered to be sacred, but material possessions unjustly accumulated were not.

<sup>3</sup> For the latest example of this tendency, see Marius B. Jansen and Gilbert Rozman, eds., *Japan in Transition: From Tokugawa to Meiji* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

ment headquarters from Ueda to Aida to Matsushiro. Some incidents in this strife merely stopped at age-old targets—the minions of feudal control in the countryside. Others included newer elements—attacks on powerful silk merchants living in towns. The participants too found new leaders in gamblers and outlaws, men who had dropped out of society. In the Chichibu incident of 1884, heavily indebted peasants formed “poor people’s parties” to petition for tax reduction and deferral of their debts. At first they acted peaceably, but they soon discovered that the Meiji state supported the dominant economic class to a far greater extent than had the previous government. It “proclaimed its neutrality and noninterference in ‘private’ lender-borrower relations, while at the time creating laws that threatened peasants with arrest and punishment for engaging in collective negotiations with their creditors” (p. 212). Drawing on the old slogans of *yonaoshi*, the peasants struck back, burning the papers that symbolized their indebtedness and trying to act as if they still lived in a world where the tenets of the moral economy held sway. Yet the discipline and careful planning that preceded the uprising, the direct confrontation with the prefectural government, the stealing, and the taking of human life mark the Chichibu incident as modern.

What was the Tokugawa legacy? According to Bix it could be found in the village communities and the landlord system carefully preserved by Meiji leaders to maintain “a set of labor-repressive institutions for extracting a surplus from the peasants”. Furthermore, by suppressing the popular demand for human rights, “some of the worst features of Japan’s authoritarian political heritage were resurrected and strengthened” (p. 227). Both this landlordism and authoritarianism go far in explaining Japan’s political disasters of the 1930s. For Bix, the question is not “what went wrong”—things were wrong from the beginning of Japan’s premodern era.<sup>4</sup> The worsening troubles of the poor and downtrodden caught in the pincers of economic exploitation and political domination simply

<sup>4</sup> This book can be read as an extended answer to the classic question posed by Edwin O. Reichauer at the end of the famous six-volume series on Japan’s modernization. “What Went Wrong,” *Dilemmas of Growth in Prewar Japan*, edited by James W. Morley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 489–510.

demonstrate the profound inequities of the Japanese state. But there is a brighter side: the tradition of peasant class struggles fueled not by imported liberal political theories but by indigenous beliefs in the rights of man.

Bix has written a powerful indictment of Japanese political and economic history, one that raises issues of fairness and exploitation ignored by conventional American historiography.<sup>5</sup> Because he deals with a broad span of time and encompasses nationwide developments, his analysis of socio-economic change is often superficial, problems for which he is certain to be criticized. For example, he accepts uncritically tax rates of up to seventy percent in the early eighteenth century rather than analyzing the relationship between putative and actual yields. In his case study of Shōnai, on the other hand, William W. Kelly has shown that by 1800 at least, the real tax rate was closer to twenty-two percent—still exploitative given the relatively low levels of productivity at the time, but closer to tax rates in premodern societies elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> We know that tax rates probably declined between 1700 and 1800, but it is inconceivable that they were ever as high as seventy percent.

Relations between the ruling class, its intermediaries, and the poor become problematic in the discussion of the long term processes that changed statuses into classes. Like all postwar historians, Bix emphasizes that even at the beginning of the Tokugawa period, Japanese villages were not homogeneous; some peasants started with advantages of wealth and prestige well above those of their neighbors.<sup>7</sup> The relationship between rich and poor indeed changed until by the nineteenth century those peasants who participated avidly in commercial opportunities had interests ranging far beyond village boundaries. They were not always the traditional village leaders, either. Particularly in villages near Edo and Osaka and on

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the introduction to Susan B. Hanley and Kozo Yamamura, *Economic and Demographic Change in Preindustrial Japan, 1600-1868* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 3-11.

<sup>6</sup> To say the actual tax rate was close to 22 percent represents a derivation I arrived at using figures on pp. 34, 42-43, 46-48 of William W. Kelly, *Deference and Defiance in Nineteenth-Century Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> This understanding of the diversity in village populations began in this country with T. C. Smith's "The Japanese Village in the Seventeenth Century," *Journal of Economic History* 12.1 (Winter 1952).

the post roads, peasants who set up tea shops, peddled their wares, or collected night soil might not be rich in land, but they had the connections and the livelihood to attract the daughters of merchants and even samurai as wives for their sons.<sup>8</sup> But because Bix assumes the presence of antagonisms between the intermediaries of the ruling class and the downtrodden from the very beginning, he ends up with a seemingly endless process of estrangement between rich and poor. Furthermore, the poor seem always to have been getting poorer. Already barely able to live in the seventeenth century, the combination of high taxes and the spread of landlordism in the eighteenth century further threatened their survival. Yet until the appearance of the semiproletariat at bakumatsu, this two-century process of impoverishment simply did what it always had done: increase antagonisms. The same criticism can be made of how he uses the term exploitation. From the beginning, the Tokugawa state set out to take all it could from the peasants despite the misery and poverty this policy caused in the countryside. Yet the new Meiji state was a far more effective exploiter of peasant resources than its predecessor had been (p. 194). If the peasants were pushed to the limit in the 1600s, how could they be pushed farther in the 1870s?

Although the book is titled "peasant protest," it is really about peasant uprisings. Many of the protest activities peasants engaged in are either ignored or given short shrift, especially the petitionary movements that often succeeded in gaining short-term improvements for the peasants without causing significant social disruption.<sup>9</sup> According to his own chart on page xxi, the "revolts" (*hōki* 蜂起) on which Bix focuses his analysis constituted only 2.6 percent of all peasant risings between 1590 and 1871. By describing only those incidents characterized by violence, he distorts the nature of peasant protest in Japan. Furthermore, whether or not the term *hōki* is justifiable is also questionable. Both Bix and Yokoyama Toshio 横山十四男 rely heavily on Aoki Kōji's 青木虹二 chronologies of peasant protest which tend, as Bix himself indicates, to inflate the number of incidents. Aoki's terminology too sometimes exaggerates

<sup>8</sup> Mori Yasuhiko, 森安彦 "Shūmon-chō ni miru kinsei josei no raifu saikuru," 宗門帳にみる近世女性のライフ・サイクル *Rekishi hyōron* 歴史評論 431 (March 1986): 34-36.

<sup>9</sup> For an analysis of petitions, see my book, *Social Protest and Popular Culture in Eighteenth Century Japan* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1986), pp. 47-71.

their significance. To call any incident between the Shimabara and Ōshio Heihachirō rebellions a revolt is to distort the relationship between peasants and the state, yet according to the figure on page xxii, these “revolts” steadily increased from 1720 on. In terms of their overall characteristics, they fit better in the category “forceful appeals” and “riots.” Finally, by defining his topic in terms of class struggle, Bix is forced to downplay if not ignore the role taken by middling and upper peasants as uprising leaders and as instigators of protest in their own right.<sup>10</sup> After all, if village officials were imposed on villages and exploited the poor, in theoretical terms, they would hardly be likely to side with their victims against the state. Yet that is precisely what they did, especially in the *osso* 越訴 (appeals in violation of the feudal chain of command). The vast majority of *gimin* 義民 (peasant martyrs) belonged to this segment of the peasant population. District representatives in the hinterlands to Osaka and Edo led province-wide appeals (*kokuso* 国訴) against the feudal restrictions on trade that, according to Bix, distorted Japan’s commercial development. The rural elite played a significant role in resisting onerous exactions by ruling authorities, perhaps to increase their own opportunities for exploiting the poor, but to understand the basis for their action requires a more sophisticated analysis than simply the notion of class struggle.

My most serious reservations center on Bix’s understanding of peasant ideology. Because of the questions he asks, his analysis is directed away from what peasants actually thought to what they should have thought. “Why did their antifeudal consciousness not evolve at a much faster rate?” he asks (p. 139). “The consciousness of people who participated in *ikki* was undeniably backward looking,” even if their historical role was progressive (p. 143). His reliance on concepts like exploitation and class struggle leads him to see attacks on the state where none in fact existed, yet he mourns the fact that peasants were not “able to produce an alternative conception of the state” (p. 148), and that “beliefs and symbols of medieval provenance operated from within to limit the growth of peasant class consciousness” (p. 143). When he is forced to come to

<sup>10</sup> See p. 74 for an example of how Bix gives pragmatic, not ideological reasons for headmen to side with the peasants.

terms with the reformist nature of peasant ideology, he blames it on medieval fetters and cruel tricks played by the rural elite on their subordinates and dependents rather than acknowledging that it arose naturally out of a pragmatic response to existing circumstances. Despite his careful presentation of Katsumata Shizuo's ideas on *ikki* 一揆 and his fascinating extended comparison with Russian peasants, by focusing on global questions of class consciousness, his own interpretation of ideology remains superficial.

By relying exclusively on the arguments of Yokoyama Toshio, Bix also distorts the significance of his key concept, *gimin* (peasant martyrs.) According to him, "the traditions and practice of dramatic human sacrifice . . . helped peasants realize the righteousness of their cause and sustained them in pursuing it" (pp. xxiii-xxv). Yet *gimin* is a modern term, coined in the Meiji period to describe "righteous men." Under its umbrella have been subsumed a wide variety of memorials to peasant martyrs. Most martyrs never served as reminders of resistance to authority in the Tokugawa period, but instead were remembered piously as beneficent deities, protectors of a region.<sup>11</sup> Of the some three hundred protest leaders commemorated in one fashion or another, only a handful were ever recalled during subsequent uprisings. Most of the time peasants preferred to forget all about disorder and the men who had led them into it. Furthermore, despite his emphasis on "traditions of peasant protest," Bix presents no evidence to suggest that the 1866 rioters in Tsuyama themselves remembered the 1726 uprising or its martyred leaders. Nor can the case be made that participants in the 1869-70 Shinshū riots lauded the deeds of their ancestors. There is indeed a shrine to Sakura Sōgorō 佐倉惣五郎 in the region where the Chichibu incident broke out, but what role it played in 1884, if any, remains unclear. Finally, most men remembered as martyrs led not violent insurrections but petitioned alone or in small groups on behalf of their villages. Like Sakura Sōgorō, the archetypical example of *gimin*, most were village headmen, that class which Bix sees as having been coopted by ruling authorities. In short, the notion of *gimin*

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the many ways memories of peasant martyrs remained vibrant in local history see my article, "Japanese Gimin: Peasant Martyrs in Popular Memory," *The American Historical Review*, 91.5 (December 1986).

or peasant martyr is also much more complex than the superficial treatment of it presented in this book.

To pick a few nits: both the glossary and the bibliography are elaborate but incomplete. Under “Historical Materials” (p. 269) are listed individual documents, types of documents, and documentary collections with no denotation of which is which. Yet while general histories like the *Tsuyama shishi* 津山市史 and *Ueda shishi* 上田市史 are listed, *Bizen, Bitchū, Mimasaka hyakushō ikki shiryō* 備前備中美作百姓一揆史料, a collection devoted exclusively to carefully annotated documents on peasant uprisings, is not. The bibliography mentions one article by Fukaya Katsumi 深屋克巳, but not his seminal articles on peasant thought and ideology.<sup>12</sup> Nor is there any listing for Hayashi Motoi’s 林基 classic studies of the traditions of peasant protest.<sup>13</sup> *Conflict in Modern Japanese History* is listed, but neither in the bibliography, the notes, nor the text is there any reference to the articles therein by Stephen Vlastos or George Wilson, even in the discussion of the events they had analyzed. Despite the existence of many fine scholarly studies of the Tenma disturbance of 1764–65, Bix relies exclusively on Kitazawa Fumitake’s 北沢文武 *Meiwa no dai ikki* 明和の大一揆 (Tokyo: Hatano Mori Shoten, 1973), a charming but popularized narrative. On page 4, Bix states that Tokugawa Ieyasu’s trusted vassal, Mori Tadamasa 森忠政 was an “outside” lord. Surely “outside” is the usual translation for *tozama* 外様 daimyo. His assertion that in 1783 “deaths from starvation occurred by the hundreds of thousands” (p. 111) exaggerates what was indeed a severe mortality crisis. At the top of page 128, the subject of discussion appears to be Matsudaira Sadanobu, not Abe Masatomo. Yet these comments are in no way meant to imply that the book can be dismissed out of hand. It is an important and challenging study that should be read by every one seriously interested in understanding the nature of Tokugawa society.

<sup>12</sup> Fukaya Katsumi, 深屋克巳 “Hyakushō ikki no shisō,” 百姓一揆の思想 *Shisō* 思想 no. 2 (February 1972) and “Hyakushō ikki” 百姓一揆 *Iwanami kōza Nihon rekishi* 岩波講座日本歴史 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1976), vol. 11.

<sup>13</sup> Hayashi Motoi, 林基 *Hyakushō ikki no dentō* 百姓一揆の伝統 (Tokyo: Shinhyōron, 1955), and *Zoku hyakushō ikki no dentō* 続百姓一揆の伝統 (Tokyo: Shinhyōron, 1971).