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## *Economic and Social Trends in Tokugawa Japan*

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THIS article expresses some dissatisfaction with the state of interpretation of economic and social trends in Japan during the Tokugawa period from 1603 to 1867. At one time there was a universal view that the Tokugawa economy was stagnant and characterized by extreme oppression of the peasantry. This view has been demolished by the writings of, for example, T. C. Smith, E. S. Crawcour, S. Hanley, Kozo Yamamura and C. D. Sheldon. Yet, it is argued here, much confusion remains after a close examination of these and other works. Crawcour and Yamamura have shown that the financial crisis at the end of the period is closely associated with a sharp deceleration of the spread of commercial transactions,<sup>1</sup> but it is at least arguable that the picture of 'a happy and prosperous peasantry'<sup>2</sup> (which is, apparently, derived from T. C. Smith's description of a dynamic, expanding economy in the eighteenth century, with steady growth in agricultural productivity and increased urbanization)<sup>3</sup> has been overdrawn.

### I

One hundred and fifteen years after the victory of the first of the Tudors at Bosworth put an end to the Wars of the Roses and heralded internal peace and unification for the English, Tokugawa Ieyasu fought the Battle of Sekigahara and achieved for Japan what Henry VII had achieved for England. Sixteenth-century Japan, like fifteenth-century England, had suffered the disruption caused by factions warring to gain political ascendancy. In Japan in 1600, as in England in 1485, no one could know whether the victor of the day would be 'dressed in a little brief authority',<sup>4</sup> or would be able to guarantee succession to his

I am indebted to Charles Sheldon for suggestions for the improvement of this article.

<sup>1</sup> E. Sydney Crawcour and Kozo Yamamura, 'The Tokugawa Monetary System: 1787-1868', *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, Vol. 18, No. 4, Pt I (July 1970).

<sup>2</sup> Ian Nish, *The Story of Japan* (London, 1968), p. 68.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas C. Smith, *The Agrarian Origins of Modern Japan* (Stanford, 1959).

<sup>4</sup> S. T. Bindoff, *Tudor England* (London, 1950), p. 8.

line. In both countries the western provinces continued their opposition and in both countries further pacification was necessary. It was in Osaka in 1615 that Ieyasu finally convinced his opponents that military resistance was futile, and the wisdom he displayed in not pursuing them in an exhausting campaign further westwards ensured over two centuries of dominance for the Tokugawa line. Ironically, though, it also made possible the effective onslaught of the western provinces on the central government in the middle of the nineteenth century.

There are, then, some interesting parallels between the patterns of unification and pacification by the founders of the Tudor and Tokugawa houses. Similarities also exist in the economic and social developments of the first hundred years of their respective dynasties: population, towns and domestic commerce expanded rapidly; new industries emerged, many of them catering for more widely-based consumer demand; and there was substantial progress in agriculture. In both countries urbanization and increased wealth were naturally accompanied by a much richer social life which, for some groups at least, embraced flourishing drama, visual arts and literature. But more striking than these—not unexpected—results of unification and peace are the divergent paths of economic, social and political change in the two countries, and the contrast between Japanese attitudes toward the outside world, and the expansionism of Western Europe.

## II

Two political decisions profoundly influenced the economic and social history of the Tokugawa period. These were the decision to close the country, to isolate it and insulate it from foreign influence; and the decision to permit the survival of virtually autonomous provinces, which maintained their own military forces, while at the same time redistributing domains in such a way that an effective deterrent to rebellion existed. This deterrent was reinforced 'by imposing upon the most powerful daimyos obligations designed to reduce their wealth and thus to limit their military strength'.<sup>5</sup> As we shall see, the significance of these obligations goes far beyond the mere sapping of the economic position of a few powerful families.

Ieyasu's rearrangement of fiefs after his victory in 1600 was one of the most spectacular in history. Fully a third of domains yielding

<sup>5</sup> Sir George Sansom, *A History of Japan, Vol. III: 1615-1867* (London, 1964), p. 9.

produce of 50,000 bushels or more were transferred from opponents to supporters. A number of those who had fought against him survived intact but many more were either totally dispossessed or had their fiefs slashed to small fractions of their original holdings.<sup>6</sup> William the Conqueror may have enjoyed an even greater discretion in parcelling out the defeated Englishmen's estates, but there is no comparison between the two operations in terms of population and production: Japan, it is said, was a country of some 18 million people at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Moreover, Ieyasu's successors consolidated the Tokugawa position by further transfers, and the result was that throughout the seventeenth century the balance of economic power rested firmly with the ruling house: fiefs of dubious loyalty probably commanded no more than two-fifths of agrarian revenue by 1700.<sup>7</sup> Even these reduced incomes were subjected to further pressure as the *sankin kōtai*, or alternate residence system, was developed to sap the economic (and, therefore, political) strength of the lords.

Ieyasu was not content merely to create a great capital at Edo, hundreds of miles from the old imperial capital at Kyoto, and even further from his strongest opponents in the south-west; not content merely to surround this base with his own huge domains and those of his family, direct military retainers, and of loyalist lords. He also required his lords to spend every other year or every other six months in Edo and compelled them to return to their estates without their families, who remained as hostages in the capital. The alternate residence system was enormously expensive for the lords, as the vast growth of Edo, which embraced a million people by the beginning of the nineteenth century, and the emergence of the urban belt of the south coast of Honshu, testify. The constant traffic along the Tōkaidō, the great route south-west from Edo, fed the dozens of urban centres which eagerly competed for the custom of the greatest of the lords and their huge retinue, and which are now an important part of the industrial base of Japan. Some of the most famous names of the Tōkaidō—Kawasaki, Fujisawa, Nagoya, Yokkaichi—are immense industrial complexes, the growth of which is compelling extensive improvement to what have been, until recently, remarkably inadequate road communications. These were, of course, even worse in the Tokugawa period, when bridge-building on the Tōkaidō was discouraged for

<sup>6</sup> Sansom, *A History of Japan, Vol. II: 1334-1615* (London, 1961), App. III, pp. 414-16.

<sup>7</sup> Sansom, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, p. 4.

military reasons and inhibited by topographical difficulties.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the concentration of population and the growth of industry and commerce along the southern coastal belt extending from Osaka to Edo has been a continuous process for several centuries. Commercial traffic relied upon Inland Sea communications, the importance of which has survived the advent of the railway locomotive and the motor vehicle. In the Tokugawa period they were indispensable and were one of the determinants of the geographical patterns of Japan's industrial development. The country's dependence in modern times on foreign raw materials and upon the export trade are additional factors explaining the sea-board character of its industrialization.

The alternate residence system was not the only impulse to urbanization and commercial expansion. Internal peace, the gradual transformation of the samurai into administrators, and the growth of population in the seventeenth century would have resulted in the expansion of urban centres without the peculiar stimulus of the *sankin kōtai*. The pleasures of urban culture would in any case have attracted the samurai—and their families—as the warrior class perforce found new functions with which to occupy themselves. Formal education developed, fitting in with Confucian concepts of the nature of the enlightened bureaucrat. It spread to the merchant classes who, spawned as they were by the necessity to serve the ruling classes and the rest of the urban population, were able to devote their increasing wealth to the pursuit of learning and the arts. Samurai and merchants—the top and the bottom of the feudal hierarchy—in turn required the services of the artisans, the manufacturers of both town and country who, though naturally ranked higher than the despised merchants, occupied a social status inferior to that of the peasantry. By the end of the seventeenth century Japan was a country of considerable civilization, both in the urban sense and in the cultural sense, with highly-developed educational systems, with flourishing theatre and literature; with gifted artisans catering both for essentials such as housing, and for luxuries such as drama; and with bureaucrats who were, in theory at least, motivated by the loftiest ideals of service and obligation. They were needed to administer not only the system of control, including alternate residence, evolved by the central feudal authority, but also the government of the hundreds of feudal territories, whose economic, social and political life became increasingly complicated

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Charles David Sheldon, *The Rise of the Merchant Class in Tokugawa Japan 1600-1868* (New York, 1958), p. 15.

with the steady increase in population, production, distribution and urbanization.

The peasants, too, found themselves operating in a vastly changed system as the decades passed. How could it be otherwise in a society which boasted some 25 million souls by the end of the seventeenth century and had been concentrating increasing numbers of them in towns, and, therefore, in pursuits which had to be supported by the efforts of the peasants left on the land? The idea of a stagnant Japan, of a society whose social and economic structure remained unchanged throughout the 250 years during which the Tokugawas attempted to maintain the *status quo*, has long since been discarded. Whatever validity it had was probably derived from the population trend of the eighteenth century when Japan experienced the familiar cycle of temporary population increases—which were wiped out by famine and disease—and decreases, perhaps reflecting extreme pressure on food supplies. Contraception, abortion and infanticide, which were typical practices of the stagnant society, contributed to the picture of decay. But even during the eighteenth century, it is said, urbanization and cultural development continued. The growth of towns heaped increased burdens on the peasantry, who rebelled more and more frequently as the century wore on, and transferred more and more of the country's income from the samurai and peasant to the merchant. The basis of Tokugawa feudalism was being eroded by forces which were, paradoxically, the result of successful Tokugawa policies: the system of alternate residence, the growth of towns, the consequent commercialization of agriculture, the relative impoverishment of the samurai and the rise of the merchants—all these trends were a product of Tokugawa policy and Tokugawa peace, yet they were also to be destructive of the Tokugawa system.

### III

In the seventeenth century, however, the seeds of destruction were still only germinating. The economic and social changes that inevitably stemmed from the imposition of the Tokugawas' particular brand of feudalism were, it is true, often the target of restrictive legislation, but they could hardly have been regarded as seriously as they were in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Population and production were expanding, control over the lords was effective, peasant rebellion was not yet a major problem, and the merchant class was still merely serving the purpose of the rulers. It was still possible for the latter to

combine contradictory policies without courting disaster: alternate residence necessarily created a situation in which peasants were attracted to the towns, yet, as in other feudal societies, laws were passed to bind them to the land. It was still possible for the familiar divergences between feudal theory and feudal practice to emerge without immediately endangering the position of the feudal hierarchy. Peasants, in theory far above the merchants in social status, were often subjected to far greater abuse, while artisans were treated with greater contempt and suffered much more severe *formal* restrictions on, for instance, consumption than did the merchants. Since ultimately all the expenses of administration and defence, all the burden of maintaining an unproductive warrior class, and all the costs of alternate residence and of other special obligations incurred by the feudal ruling class devolved upon the peasants, the capacity of the rural economy to generate an income surplus to its own requirements was of crucial importance. Perhaps of equal importance was the relationship between the demands made upon the peasantry and the opportunities that existed to increase productivity in response to those demands. How does one measure the degree to which peasants are oppressed in any feudal society? Sometimes the criterion used is the proportion of the peasants' produce extracted in taxes, with the often unspoken assumption that anything over 50 per cent is unduly burdensome. The distribution of the revenue may be emphasized: the peasant cannot legitimately attack expenditure on the apparatus of the state essential to the maintenance of law and order and whatever infrastructure is necessary to enable him to produce at all; but too often he feels the exactions are devoted to the support of grossly-swollen bureaucracies and unproductive and effete aristocracies, not to mention the ever present and accursed middlemen who swarm out from under any layer of civilization. Again, the substance of the countryside may be drained for war—civil or foreign adventure—and little or none of it returned to the land in the shape of investment. (This does not, of course, apply to Japan: the Tokugawa period was free of warfare.) There may be insufficient produce left to finance drainage, irrigation, new or even existing forms of implements, building, or, in the worst times of all, to guarantee even next year's crop. Another index of oppression sometimes adopted is the number of peasants' revolts, where these can be assumed to result from an oppressive burden of taxation.

Even rising productivity may not be evidence of the absence of any oppressive system, because excessive taxes might, for a time, induce new methods and new efforts to meet the demands made. Despite the

aid of all the modern social sciences, views on the economic, social, political and psychological effects of modern taxes diverge sharply, so it should not be a surprise to read that Japanese feudal taxation has been regarded, at one end of the scale, as cruelly oppressive of the peasantry, and, at the other end, as a steadily diminishing burden as the authorities failed to revise their tax assessments to bring them into line with improved productivity. Both shogunal and domain governments relied upon land taxes for most of their revenue, and as there were over 250 domains there was considerable variation in the tax burden, although not necessarily in the percentage of the assessed yield, because official assessments were not always the same as actual yields. The burden of taxes would naturally vary with the attitudes of officials, who were supposed to make allowance for variations in yields but who would naturally be aware that domain expenditures were not always so flexible.

It is, perhaps, a measure of the difference in the economic climate of the first century of Tokugawa rule that revisions of tax assessments seem to have been much more frequent in the seventeenth century than in the eighteenth or first half of the nineteenth centuries, when they were, in fact, rarely attempted in spite of the great financial pressure felt by the Tokugawa central government and by many of the domain governments.<sup>9</sup> The significance of seventeenth-century practice is great. It implies that economic conditions were then more favourable for most sections of the rural community than they were in the eighteenth century. The country's growing population could still seek out new areas of land, while agricultural productivity was improved sufficiently quickly to support large numbers in urban centres. The assault by the Tokugawa system of control on the financial power of the lords may have been deliberate and successful, but its consequences were less serious than in subsequent decades, if only because it was possible at least to avoid bankruptcy. The peasantry, in turn, were able to meet their masters' demands without feeling more than usually oppressed because their opportunities for expanding production and, in many instances, for benefiting from the growth of the market, were also improving. It is in the eighteenth century that the consequences of seventeenth-century expansion and change make their full impact.

#### IV

If it was strange for a comparatively advanced nation to embark upon a

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Smith, 'The Land Tax in the Tokugawa Period', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. XVIII, No. 1 (November 1958), p. 5.



rigid feudal course in the seventeenth century, with unique instruments of control such as the system of alternate residence, it was even more remarkable that it should have been able to achieve an almost complete isolation from the rest of the world. Japan had, of course, always been remote, and it was not until after 1540 that it attracted much attention from the Western world, although it had had, for many centuries, cultural and economic connexions with mainland Asia, notably China. Since China also kept itself aloof from outside influence and relatively free from foreign interference until the middle of the nineteenth century, it may seem that the importance of Japan's policy of *sakoku*, or seclusion, is often exaggerated, and it could be agreed that it was the violent—the spectacularly violent—nature of its break with the West in the 1630s that has highlighted its isolationism in spite of the example of China. Seclusion was enforced upon Japanese and foreigner alike, with impartial ferocity, culminating in the massacre of Japanese Christians in Kyūshū in the late 1630s and the execution of 57 Portuguese envoys in 1640 for defying the exclusion edict of 1639.<sup>10</sup>

It was not mere dislike of foreign religions that motivated these actions. Isolationism was a logical, perhaps an indispensable, part of a policy designed by Iemitsu (the third Tokugawa shogun) to petrify the structure laid down by Ieyasu and his successor Hidetada between 1600 and 1623. Japan, like Western European nations, had looked outwards in the sixteenth century, and, like England, had begun to adopt attitudes and enterprises appropriate to a developing, vigorous, maritime nation. It had also completed its process of unification under a single powerful dynasty during precisely the same period. The first Tokugawa shogun, Ieyasu, was by no means an isolationist. He displayed a lively interest in maritime affairs, including shipbuilding, and for a time there was every indication that Japan would continue to develop as a foreign-trading nation. But it was soon obvious that a society exposed to the economic, political and intellectual pressures that were necessarily part of the process of internationalization—particularly a society of people as lively as the Japanese—would find it difficult, if not impossible, to maintain the delicate balance of power achieved after Sekigahara. The ability of foreign religions to capture Japanese minds (always regarded, rightly or wrongly, as peculiarly susceptible to novel ideas and gadgetry) was but one, perhaps minor, aspect of the problem facing the early Tokugawas. The heart of the matter was the paramount need to avoid any influence that would contribute to the disruption of the political and economic solution

<sup>10</sup> Sansom, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, pp. 38–9.

imposed by Ieyasu upon the territorial lords from 1600 onwards. It seemed to be no accident that foreign ideas and alignments were most developed in the remote south-western provinces, which remained hostile to the Tokugawa house and which had reaped considerable benefit from the growth of foreign trade.<sup>11</sup> Nor should it be forgotten that the hostility seemed all the more threatening when it appeared alongside the arrogance of the Latin merchants and missionaries. In contrast to the Dutch, who seemed interested only in capturing trade, the Portuguese and Spaniards appeared to be overbearingly convinced of the superiority of their beliefs as well as of their goods. Their attitude contributed to the decision to shut them out, and the more limited aims of the Dutch (who, in addition, were actively hostile to Spain and Portugal) eventually assured them of the limited franchise they were to enjoy for the next two centuries from their base on Deshima, off Nagasaki in Kyūshū.

Fortunately for the Tokugawa, Japan, remote and inhospitable as its islands were, was not sufficiently attractive for the Western nations to make any particular effort to overcome its policy of seclusion. They left it alone in the seventeenth century and concentrated on other areas, such as India and the Spice Islands, which had the goods in demand. Japan, although it must have looked a fairly promising market, with its rapidly developing urban civilization and growing population, did not offer anything comparable. It was, moreover, not on any major trade routes, and it is significant that it was not until the nineteenth century, when trans-Pacific commerce developed and the technology of marine transportation began to change, that it came under pressure once again. Its ports, and later its possibilities as a coaling station, attracted the United States in particular from the 1840s.

In the seventeenth century, however, Japan was allowed to withdraw and to develop a set of institutions, practices, attitudes and economic and social relationships that were to become, in the nineteenth century, a source of wonder and derision for the Western sailors and merchants who opened it up. It is of great interest and value to explore the implications of isolationism, which are, in their economic and social aspects, far wider than the mere absence of foreign trade and foreign influences, although the removal of these alone had far-reaching effects. The economics and sociology of seclusion can hardly be understood without

<sup>11</sup> Edwin O. Reischauer, 'Japanese Feudalism', in Rushton Coulborn (ed.), *Feudalism in History* (Hamden, Conn., 1965), p. 44: 'The feudal lords of the coastal fringes of western Japan came to depend on the profits of foreign trade for a major part of their income.'

regarding the policy as part of a totality—of the determination to preserve the feudal hierarchy, to maintain the economic, social and political *status quo*. Isolationism was therefore a factor in a wide range of institutional arrangements and in the pattern of property ownership and income distribution. It dictated or influenced the development and structure of agriculture, industry and commerce, and conditioned patterns of consumption as well as of production. It had a profound effect upon education, religion and ethics and also confined scientific and technological enquiry within a much more limited framework than in the West. Edwin Reischauer has written:<sup>12</sup>

Isolation may also be the basic factor which allowed Japanese feudalism to continue into a highly advanced or, one might better say, badly degenerated phase, which finds no very clear parallel in the West. . . . During the second half of the sixteenth century, when representatives of the Western world suddenly broke in upon the isolated Japanese, feudal institutions of all sorts changed more rapidly and drastically than ever before, and there were signs that feudalism itself might be swept away within a short time. The artificially imposed isolation of the next two centuries halted this trend.

Evaluation of the benefits and disadvantages of the two centuries of isolation cannot be attempted here. What is now necessary is a more detailed treatment of the operation of the Japanese economy and the structure of Japanese society that evolved within this basic and apparently rigid framework of isolation and feudal control.

## V

It is almost conventional for economic historians to qualify accounts of extreme political and military upheaval with riders emphasizing the continuity of economic life, particularly in the countryside. Warring factions and war-lords may come and go but the production of food and other essentials of life goes on in the same, time-honoured, fashion from year to year. There may be variations in the degree of oppression of the peasantry, but usually *only* in the degree, for the peasant in a predominantly agrarian country does, after all, shoulder the burden of the rest of the community. Even an account of the rise of towns, and hence of commerce, may simultaneously combine an analysis of the inevitable disruption of rural society and agricultural organization and practice, and more particularly of the inevitable destruction of the feudal order where this exists, with great emphasis on the conservatism

<sup>12</sup> Reischauer, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

of agriculturalists and the ineluctable truth that traditional agriculture changes but slowly and reluctantly in response to normal stimuli—that is, stimuli which fall short of catastrophic events such as total war and unparalleled natural disasters. This emphasis serves a useful function if it places economic change in its proper perspective, if it corrects a tendency to write, for instance, of ‘agricultural revolution in the seventeenth century’ as though the century passed almost as swiftly as the formulation of the phrase itself. But if we are not to dismiss out-of-hand the current preoccupation with the ability, or inability, of peasant societies to respond to change or the opportunities for change, we have to recognize that even periods of ‘normal’ stimuli may differ greatly in their economic experience, and that certain types of pressures or opportunities may produce radically different results in different economic contexts, despite the important characteristics that these situations may have in common.

It is useful to bear these remarks in mind when attempting to unravel the complex history of agrarian change in Tokugawa Japan; when attempting, for instance, to balance the elements of resistance to change, the elements of continuity (whose bases, of course, may be different from mere resistance or conservatism), and the receptivity displayed by the peasants to new ideas, new techniques, and to market stimuli. The story is made more than usually complex for several reasons. First, historians have tended to concentrate on topics, or problems, and it is often far from clear whether their remarks are intended to apply to the seventeenth, the eighteenth, or the nineteenth centuries, or, indeed, are meant to be adopted as generalized truths about the whole of the Tokugawa period. Secondly, Japan is similar to other populous countries in possessing a considerably varied regional agrarian history. Finally, even the most lucid and meticulous of the historians of agrarian Japan find it difficult to avoid presenting conclusions that appear contradictory. The apparent tortuousness of some of the literature stems from compulsion to ‘explain’ the simultaneous presence of great dynamism and profound conservatism in, especially, the period 1868–1941. The compulsion is there because everyone must be a ‘growth’ expert, and because Japanese economic and social structures have proved to be a mine for comparative analysts. The confusion is there because the dynamism seems to be found in economic activity and the conservatism in social life, yet often the distinction is either imperfectly realized or hazily drawn; and because although it is recognized that social relationships often change more slowly than economic relationships, the economic relationships themselves are sometimes difficult to

generalize. These difficulties are best illustrated from the work of the foremost Western historian of Tokugawa agriculture.<sup>13</sup> Professor Smith's study is more than a description of agrarian institutions and practice in the years between 1600 and 1868; it is explicitly concerned with an analysis of the significance for the post-1868 economic development of Japan of the rise in agricultural productivity that took place in the Tokugawa period, and of the fundamental changes in economic relationships that enabled this increased level of performance to be achieved. The origins, or the basis, of Japan's successful modernization, are, it is said, to be found in the pre-1868 transformation of the country's rural economy. The nature of this transformation will be no surprise to readers of early modern European and English economic history: internal unification and peace; population growth and urbanization; the decline in self-sufficiency and the commercialization of agriculture, the organization of which shifts from co-operative to an individual basis (in Japan, to a nuclear family basis); the consequent—and contingent—impersonalization of relationships in the productive process, with the factors of production, particularly labour, responding to changes in the level and structure of payment; the rise of new groups in the countryside dedicated to the application of new techniques and to the adoption of new systems of tenure, groups which have a great social and political, as well as an economic significance. The economic results of these changes are plain: the increased production sustains the agricultural economy, finances its expansion through increased investment, and, in addition, supports the urban and industrial economy which has provided the stimulus for change. Although the surpluses generated in agriculture have not yet been applied to 'modern' economic goals, the structure has been created, the relationships have been transformed, the correct attitudes and aptitudes have been developed, and the stage is therefore set for the great leap forward after 1868. Thus the story unfolds.

Yet at the same time agrarian society 'remained a vast and populous hinterland of conservatism', and 'commercial values did not penetrate a very large area of economic relations, which remained embedded in custom-bound social groups'.<sup>14</sup> Again, 'the authority of the village over its members remained exceedingly strong' while in rice culture 'any serious breach of solidarity directly threatened the communal foundations of farming'.<sup>15</sup> We are left with, it must be admitted, a complex mixture of conservatism and progressiveness which is hard to summarize briefly. We are told that commercialization of, and wage-

<sup>13</sup> Smith, *Origins*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

payments in, agriculture 'had taught peasants to respond with alacrity to monetary incentives',<sup>16</sup> but we are almost simultaneously cautioned that even in the 1930s the proportion of output marketed was comparatively low, and that in certain areas ('large parts of Tōhoku, Hokuriku, Kyūshū') individualistic practice in agriculture was only just emerging at the end of the Tokugawa period.<sup>17</sup> The peasant had freedom to farm as he wished but only 'within certain broad limits';<sup>18</sup> social control had been loosened—but at the same time agriculture had not changed so much as to destroy the habit of loyalty and obedience;<sup>19</sup> and, as noted above, the sanction of the village remained very powerful.

It could be that the areas of conservatism and the areas of rapid change were quite distinct, that it is unnecessary to try to reconcile the conflict of loyalty and progress because they did not always co-exist. It may even be possible to counter the criticism that the areas of tradition could not have been as economically significant as the areas of progress (because the overall result was one of responsiveness to change), with the argument that they were, nevertheless, of great significance in their support of the authoritarian state and their contribution to political and social stability. But progress and traditional practice rode in tandem in the same village,<sup>20</sup> and even the extent of conservatism or isolation from commercial influences is obscure.

Since the agrarian changes of the centuries after 1600<sup>21</sup> are said to be the condition of Japan's success after 1868, it follows that their nature must be clearly understood. Yet it is precisely this that is difficult. If, as Smith argues, the impact of the market was negligible in the seventeenth century but enormously productive of change in the eighteenth, and if it is true that population expanded rapidly until about 1720 and then hardly at all for the next century, one would have to assume either a very significant increase in urbanization in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries or greatly increased specialization in agricultural production to justify the view that the market expanded rapidly. But urbanization was already at the level of about one-fifth of the population around 1750,<sup>22</sup> and as it is generally accepted that peasants were still some 80 per cent of the population in the 1860s,<sup>23</sup> it hardly seems

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 209–10.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>21</sup> Even here, Smith shifts from 1700 to 1600 rather arbitrarily: contrast pp. 201 and 211.

<sup>22</sup> Professor Toshio Furushima's estimate of 22 per cent, quoted in Smith, *Origins*, p. 68.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Crawcour, 'The Tokugawa Heritage', in William W. Lockwood, *The State and Economic Enterprise in Japan* (Princeton, 1965), p. 25.

possible that urban areas continued to absorb very many more people after the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, there is considerable evidence of increased specialization within agriculture in the century and a half after 1700, and this would obviously have necessitated a greatly expanded volume of commercial exchange. Some estimates of the proportion of output entering the market in the 1860s go as high as two-thirds,<sup>25</sup> and although these are disputed it seems probable that the degree to which agriculture was commercialized greatly exceeded the proportion of the population not engaged in agricultural production. Further evidence of the substantial proportion of produce marketed is the judgment that at least one-third of the peasants' output went in taxation and, since the warrior class did not live in the countryside, the merchants must have handled at least a comparable proportion because, in addition, they themselves and the artisans in the towns had to be supported, and some districts, notably in the Kinai area (which embraced Kyoto and Osaka), were largely given over to production for the industrial market.

It must be emphasized that increased specialization is relied upon as an explanation of the expansion of the market because it seems impossible to reconcile conflicting interpretations of the process of urbanization. There may, as Professor Smith has said, have been considerable waste and inefficiency in seventeenth-century Japanese agriculture through the lack of specialization, but it seems wrong to attribute this to the lack of an urban market. Urbanization appears to have developed more rapidly in the seventeenth than in the eighteenth century, and the reason that agricultural change appears to have been less fundamental may be the scope that still existed for extension of cultivation. Acreage and total population expanded together until the early eighteenth century: land area cultivated probably doubled from 3.7 million to 7.5 million acres in the 150 years before 1725, while population may have risen by almost 50 per cent (from, say, 18 million to 26½ million).<sup>26</sup> From the 1720s both land area and total population ceased to rise significantly. In fact, population may reasonably be assumed to have been increasing around 1700 rather more rapidly than the ability of agriculture to sustain a gradually rising standard of

<sup>24</sup> Smith implies it was much higher than a fifth in the early nineteenth century: *Origins*, p. 68.

<sup>25</sup> E.g. Crawcour, 'The Tokugawa Heritage', p. 41.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Irene B. Taeuber, *The Population of Japan* (Princeton, 1958), pp. 19, 20, 22. Population figures are for commoners only. Samurai and other classes excluded from the Tokugawa enumerations may have numbered anything up to 3 million or so in the 1720s.

living. The resort to contraception, abortion and infanticide may be regarded as a response either to an inability to increase yields sufficiently quickly to cater for even a slowly rising population, or to a desire to distribute the improved productivity of the land—which yielded more from better irrigation and improved techniques—among a stationary population. Other explanations have been put forward which include the thesis that the peasant had to provide, through an increased burden of taxation, for the steadily growing taste for luxury and the arts in the towns and cities. As we have already seen, the general picture seems to have been one of remarkable inefficiency on the part of the officials, who failed to keep taxes in line with improved yields; yet famine and peasant uprisings are also said to have increased in the eighteenth century. It could be that the reporting of famine and unrest became more meticulous after 1750 and there is, it is true, no contradiction between improved agricultural practice, widespread specialization and periodic famines and peasant discontent. On the contrary, if it is correct that the division of function in agriculture had reached a high level by 1800, then flood, drought and pest could bring catastrophic results because they needed to hit fewer areas. Farmers all over the country who grew their own food would obviously be less vulnerable collectively than farmers who were divided into specialized categories. Certainly the population of Japan suffered enormously at times in the eighteenth century. Counts were taken every six years after 1726 and the figures show absolute drops in five of the twelve counts between 1732 and 1804. Possibly the worst famine in Japan's modern history occurred in the 1780s, when the population fell by over a million, declining from 26 million in 1780 to 24.9 million in 1792.<sup>27</sup> But if there is no contradiction between specialization, productivity increase, and a stagnant population periodically subject to famine, there is a marked contrast between an account that emphasizes the growth of towns, industry, commerce and culture, and an account of the population trend and the obvious harshness of the life of the poor. The former is a story of the response of agriculture to wonderful new opportunities: the farmer could specialize in cotton or indigo or cocoons and buy in his food and even luxuries because the spread of the money economy facilitated the marketing of ever-increasing varieties of goods. He developed new techniques of production, he benefited (or suffered) from new patterns of landholding, and he could even leave the farm for the city, or at least, could combine agricultural and industrial employment. Many an eighteenth-century peasant,

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 22, and Sansom, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, pp. 186–7.



who cultivated land leased from the larger landowners and enjoyed considerable freedom to produce what he wished, could reflect that his forebears of the early seventeenth century would almost certainly have been part of an extended co-operative unit, within which individual enterprise or talent would have been stifled, and would have been quite probably mere servants, bonded for many years of service. Even if he had held some land, he would very likely have been liable to contribute onerous labour services. But by the eighteenth century there had been radical changes: large holdings were let out to tenants, and the size of the farming unit had become pretty uniform, dictated as it was by the capacity of the nuclear family (as distinct from the extended family, with several married couples) to work it. The norm was, therefore, an individual farming unit, inhibited, of course, by the customary needs of the village and the dictates of rice culture, but enjoying more freedom than had been imaginable at the beginning of the seventeenth century. If the peasant were inclined, he could sell his services on a labour market where prices were rising throughout the eighteenth century. This century saw, then, a great reduction of the 'prodigious waste of labour' that had occurred 'on *all* holdings' in the early Tokugawa period.<sup>28</sup> The market gave to the peasant and his family the opportunity to make fuller use of their labour, while specialization raised the level of total production.

## VI

But an alternative account of the eighteenth century is also plausible. New arable land was no longer available and the rise in agricultural productivity was insufficient to sustain an increasing population because urbanization had already reached a level at which the surplus available was fully absorbed. There could be no resort to foreign sources of food and raw materials in times of bad harvest because Japan was isolated from the rest of the world. The prosperity of both town and country was therefore vulnerable, disastrously vulnerable at times, to the onslaught of nature. Natural disaster apart, the eighteenth-century Japanese peasant could find himself squeezed between, for instance, the pincer movements of his selling and buying in prices. Opportunity also meant risk, and while increased production for a market could bring profit, it might also have to be unloaded at unfavourable prices to a merchant class who could at the same time charge him high for

<sup>28</sup> Smith, *Origins*, pp. 129-30.

fertilizer. The larger landowner was often the merchant, and in both capacities could be the smaller peasant's creditor: there seems no doubt of the tendency towards concentration of landownership in the eighteenth century, or of the role of debt in this process. It follows that the individual peasant suffered from greater insecurity and probably had more reason to feel resentment against some of his fellow peasants than before. When to this is added the incidence of taxation, the periodic famine conditions, and the feeling that the town, with its warrior-bureaucrats and parasitic merchant class, was sucking away at his substance, it is anyone's guess whether the peasant felt a greater sense of the opportunity or of the insecurity that life offered. In any case, it is very difficult to believe that a society whose population stagnated and whose people practised abortion and infanticide, when disease and famine did not provide the necessary infant mortality rate, could have been seized by a feeling of the dynamic, expanding economy. Nor does it seem reasonable to regard as so impressive the changes taking place in an agriculture that merely maintained a stagnant population for a century, even when we grant that its pattern of production changed to allow a measure of handicraft output in the countryside as well as in the town, and to allow a degree of specialization in crops. It is possible to argue that Japan consciously limited its population in the face of a significantly increasing production to ensure a rising standard of living, but it seems much more reasonable to suppose that the economic condition of the mass of the people at the end of the eighteenth century was at best unchanged from, and, at the worst, much inferior to, what it was in 1700. It is often said that the samurai's economic position deteriorated in the eighteenth century, while that of the town merchant and rural capitalist improved. The ruling classes' inability even to maintain their share of the cake has always seemed inexplicable in political terms, because if rural productivity had increased so significantly there should have been little political risk involved in an attempt merely to maintain the effective rate of taxation. The failure becomes comprehensible if we accept the explanation that the average peasant's increase in productivity (whether this was very small or fairly substantial) was absorbed by the merchant and other urban classes. Since the peasantry still constituted some four-fifths of the population in the middle of the nineteenth century, it follows that the surplus from agriculture, which was divided amongst the samurai class (whose position was economically unenviable) and the bourgeois and other urban classes that made up 15 per cent or so of the population, was either so large as to have been

extracted with great oppression of the peasantry, or was much smaller than has been assumed by some historians. If the samurai were no more than 7 per cent of the population, yet absorbed most of the 25 per cent or so of gross national product raised by taxation,<sup>29</sup> we must surely assume that the rest of the urban population, which is reckoned to have been twice as large as the number of samurai and their families, took at least as much as the samurai—say, a quarter of the national income. This would have left 80 per cent of the population with not much more than half—perhaps less than half—of the national income of the country.

Whether one concludes that a large and fairly rapidly increasing surplus was squeezed from the peasant in the eighteenth century by samurai and merchant, or that fairly meagre gains in productivity after the 1720s went to support the slight increases in population and urbanization that may have occurred,<sup>30</sup> and that the size of the surplus did not significantly increase in this period, the implications for the standard of living of the mass of the people are the same: the Japanese peasant typically lived at a bare subsistence level, a situation which, given the lack of foreign trade and rather frequent periods of famine, was one of extreme pressure and insecurity. This conclusion is supported by the view held by two eminent analysts of Japan's economic development: that Japan was, as late as 1868, 'strongly typified by the small peasant cultivator *working* only slightly above subsistence levels',<sup>31</sup> a view that should lead us further to doubt the picture of substantial agricultural progress in the eighteenth century. Clearly there were regional variations, and some areas of the south and central belt of Honshū were closely engaged in commercial farming, which no doubt stimulated improvements and specialization, but if the typical peasant was *working* only slightly above subsistence he was certainly not *living* at more than subsistence level, because taxes took a substantial proportion of his produce. This view is more compatible with peasant

<sup>29</sup> Crawcour, 'The Tokugawa Heritage', pp. 25, 31. The percentage of national income absorbed by taxes is sometimes said to be somewhat higher. See, for example, Johannes Hirschmeier, *The Origins of Entrepreneurship in Meiji Japan* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), p. 67, where the range is put at 25–30 per cent.

<sup>30</sup> The reader is reminded that the area under cultivation is believed to have increased little, if at all, during the eighteenth century. Any increase in agricultural production would, therefore, have depended upon improved yields.

<sup>31</sup> Kazushi Ohkawa and Henry Rosovsky, 'A Century of Japanese Economic Growth', in Lockwood, *op. cit.*, p. 54 (my italics). Henry Rosovsky reiterated this view in virtually identical words in his paper 'Japan's Transition to Modern Economic Growth, 1868–1885', in H. Rosovsky (ed.), *Industrialization in Two Systems: Essays in Honor of Alexander Gerschenkron* (New York, 1966), pp. 95–6.

rebellion than with a triumphant transformation of agrarian structure.

Nothing that has been said so far should be taken to contradict the belief that Japanese agriculture produced a surplus capable of feeding some 20 per cent of the population not engaged in food production—or more than 20 per cent if to the urban population are added other groups such as those farmers who specialized in crops for industrial uses.<sup>32</sup> But it had accomplished this before the middle of the eighteenth century, and if Professor Hayami's suspicion, that the rate of population increase in the seventeenth century has been underestimated, is justified, there seems even more reason to believe that the failure of population to grow at all significantly in the eighteenth century was a result of the kind of economic pressure that contradicts the thesis that agriculture was responding in a vital manner to greatly improved market opportunities. He has argued that it is possible that the population of Japan in the early Tokugawa period was not 18 million but as low as from 6¼ to 10 million. If the population had grown to 30 million, that is, trebled or even quintupled by 1721, but thereafter increased by only one-sixth in the next 150 years,<sup>33</sup> the contrast in the economic conditions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is even more profound. If population grew between 1600 and 1721 at a much faster rate than the area of cultivated land, the changes in agricultural practice listed by Professor Smith as mainly an eighteenth-century response to the increase in the market must have been largely concentrated in the seventeenth and very early eighteenth centuries. It is, perhaps, difficult to be fair to Smith's account because he does say that these changes took place *from* the early Tokugawa period, but throughout his book he makes numerous references to the seventeenth century as a period in which the market could not have been the powerful factor that it was in the eighteenth. It now seems clear that the triumph of the nuclear family farming unit (with the associated freeing of hereditary and indentured servants to farm holdings on their own account, and with the associated rise in tenancy, as servants and subordinate farmers ceased to owe labour services as the Tokugawa period wore on, a development on which Smith places so much emphasis) was largely completed by the early eighteenth century, and

<sup>32</sup> Although Naotaro Sekiyama's estimate of urban population in the latter half of the Tokugawa period was only 12 per cent or 3.7–3.8 million of a total population of 30 million: *Kinsei Nihon no jinkō kōzō* (Tokyo, 1958), p. 239, quoted in Akira Hayami, 'The Population at the Beginning of the Tokugawa Period', *Keio Economic Studies*, Vol. 4 (1966–67), p. 22. I am grateful to Professor R. P. Dore for drawing my attention to this reference.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22–3. Population in 1870 is estimated at 35 million by Hayami.

that the rise of towns and the ability of agriculture to support a larger and increasingly non-agrarian population had also reached its limit by the same time. From then on, whatever improvement there was in the quality of urban life and in the standards of rural capitalists rested upon the commercial and agrarian structures built up before the middle of the eighteenth century, and the ability of these groups to gain at the expense of ordinary peasants. If an additional source was presented by increases in agricultural productivity it seems that these must have been painfully small. The towns did not expand greatly, nor did the average Japanese peasant enjoy even a modest-sized family in the eighteenth century. To him urban Japan must have appeared to be a millstone round his neck, not a source of opportunity. For him it represented a yawning mouth which sucked in the precious rice which he, having to pay his taxes, often could not afford to eat, forcing him to rely on inferior grain for his food. Moreover, he had it on good authority—the pronouncements and edicts of his betters, the Tokugawa rulers—that those towns were inhabited by grasping, commercialized parasites, who were living an evil and luxurious life (even the samurai, complained a contemporary, ‘look like women and think like merchants’)<sup>34</sup> at the expense of the only really worthy members of society: the warriors, the administrators, and the peasants. For him, famine seemed only too often his unjust reward, and rebellion his only possible protest.<sup>35</sup>

## VII

Naturally, the townsman saw it differently. For him the town nurtured everything that distinguishes the civilized from the uncivilized. It was in the town that education, art, literature, and the theatre flourished. There, also, intellectual protest at the deadweight of Bakufu obscurantism and isolationism could develop, as could, on a more mundane level, the markets for the wider range of goods that also enhanced the quality of life. These markets meant opportunity for some at least of the peasantry, who were energetic or fortunate enough to command a surplus to trade for money or goods. Already in the early seventeenth century some areas had quite highly developed commercial networks,

<sup>34</sup> Cf. R. P. Dore, *Education in Tokugawa Japan* (London, 1965), p. 193.

<sup>35</sup> According to Sir George Sansom there were over 1,600 peasant uprisings in the Tokugawa period, ‘mostly occurring after 1730’. Sansom, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, p. 186 n. 2.

while the process of removing the warriors from the countryside to the castle-towns, a process which ante-dated the supremacy of the Tokugawa, was finally completed. The alternate residence system was, as we have seen, an innovation which further stimulated an urban development that for climatic and other geographical reasons would have occurred along the warm and fertile south coastal belt.

There was nothing unique about the general economic development of these cities and towns, although the particular forms of commercial organization that emerged were inevitably given distinctive characteristics by the peculiarities of Japanese society. The maintenance of a large upper class of lords and retainers completely separated from the land necessarily caused extensive commercial development, and in Japan, if not in Western societies, led to aristocratic indebtedness to the mercantile classes. In the less rigid societies of Western Europe it was at least possible for the owners of large estates and for the gentry to take an active part in agricultural development and even in trade, both domestic and foreign, from which large profits could be gained. But, after some fluidity in social structure in the early seventeenth century, in Japan the samurai were confined to administration, teaching, and the fostering of martial techniques. By the eighteenth century they were firmly in the grip of the merchants who were handling an estimated 75 per cent of the rice raised in taxes to support government and to pay the stipends of the samurai. Throughout the seventeenth century, and particularly from the 1630s when Osaka began to exert a dominant influence in trade, the merchants had been able to command an increasing amount of the wealth made available by this system of feudal service and payment. The samurai either gave rice notes to the merchants, thus never dealing in the grain at all, or sold it off frequently in advance of cropping. The inability of the domain and central governments to increase their revenues, which increasingly fell behind expenditure in the eighteenth century, directly affected the samurai, who at times had to accept delays in the payment of, and even suffered the indignity of cuts in, their stipends. Their taste for the pleasures of city life had had plenty of time to develop and mature and their only recourse was to the merchants, to whom they fell ever more deeply into debt. The merchants, who had been trading on a modest scale in small market and castle-towns in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, would no doubt have prospered with the rise in population and the growth of towns. But the special features of the Tokugawa political and economic settlement had given them a bonanza by the later seventeenth century.

Osaka was their stronghold, not because it was the biggest city—Edo claimed this title by the end of the seventeenth century—nor because it was the most culturally glamorous and beautiful—Kyoto could justly claim these distinctions—but because it was the *entrepôt* for a large proportion of the food and manufactures that flowed to Edo from Kyūshū in the south-west, from the remote provinces of the Japan Sea Coast, and from Osaka's own fertile and densely populated hinterland. It was therefore Osaka which led the way in the development of the credit system that became essential in an increasingly complicated network embracing producers, wholesalers, shippers, retailers and consumers. Banking and paper credit instruments of various kinds developed in Osaka long before the city's merchants and financiers had integrated with their counterparts in Edo, Kyoto and provincial centres to form a comparatively sophisticated network of credit transactions. This network emerged under the domination of the 'Big Ten Bankers' of Osaka from 1662,<sup>36</sup> and provided facilities not only for normal commercial transactions but also for the remittance of government revenues, for the acceptance of which official exchange bankers were appointed in 1691. The business house of Mitsui, one of the few privileged merchant and banking firms of the old régime to emerge as a *zaibatsu* (combine) in the modern period after 1868, operated within this system in both Edo and Osaka.

The merchants had no political power nor did they enjoy respected social status; they were, moreover, subject to the risks of default and to governmental levies, the Japanese term for which—*goyōkin*—has been translated as forced 'loans'. Forced 'gifts' would be a more accurate description of the exactions, some of which amounted to huge sums in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In 1761, for instance, the Shogun attempted to levy 1¼ million *ryō* from Osaka merchants,<sup>37</sup> a demand which probably exceeded the central government's total revenue from taxes on cultivated land in its domains.<sup>38</sup>

These demands illustrated, however, the great wealth of the business houses of the cities as well as the arbitrary manner with which they could be handled by the ruling classes. Their organization, expertise

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Crawcour, 'The Development of a Credit System in Seventeenth-century Japan', *Journal of Economic History*, Vol. XXI, No. 3 (September 1961).

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Sheldon, *op. cit.*, p. 119. The merchants offered 700,000 *ryō* which may have been approximately the sum raised.

<sup>38</sup> According to Sansom, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, p. 166, the land tax revenue from the Tokugawa domains reached a peak of 1.8 million *koku* (about 9 million bushels) in 1744, and declined to about 1.2 million *koku* in 1770. A *koku* is regarded as equivalent to one gold *ryō* at this time.

and wealth became indispensable to the economic order and as a class they were impregnable, in spite of any individual's vulnerability,<sup>39</sup> so long as that economic order persisted. The corollary of their rising wealth was the relative decline of the samurai and lords, some of whom noted with anger and envy that they lived in smaller houses than the rich merchants. Just as irritating must have been the elimination of other signs of superiority: occasionally rich merchants were granted the privilege of sword-wearing—in theory restricted to the warrior class—and, much more frequently, they displayed literary and other cultural accomplishments to rival those of their betters. Some of them could, moreover, better afford their patronage of the arts.

In Japan, as in other countries, the ruling class was initially responsible for the growth of interest in education and the arts. The samurai replaced the priest as the archetypal man of letters in the seventeenth century, but if the priesthood had had a monopoly in their field in the sixteenth century, the samurai, practically all of whom were literate by the end of the Tokugawa period, were only *primi inter pares*: townsmen were literate when they were not poor, and even prosperous farmers—particularly village headmen—could often read and write. The avidity with which Japanese of all levels of society pursued formal education, for their children if not for themselves, separated them from other Asian countries of the nineteenth century and even from some advanced Western societies before 1850. As Professor Dore says, mid-nineteenth-century Japan 'was a world in which books abounded'.<sup>40</sup>

This advanced level of education was largely a product of the period after 1750, when the movement to establish fief schools (for samurai) and elementary schools (for commoners) gathered momentum. It coincided with increased interest in foreign literature and science (mainly Dutch and Chinese) and in what was called 'Japanese' learning, to distinguish study of Japanese language and literature from the Chinese-dominated classics. The development of urban life is inseparable from the rise of independent enquiry, which usually involves an attack on rigid attitudes based on a traditional social structure and a traditional political and moral philosophy. Japanese society from the later eighteenth century was no exception to this generalization.

Yet the hold of the Tokugawas was still remarkably strong as the

<sup>39</sup> There were cases of total confiscation of a merchant's wealth, e.g. that of Yodoya of Osaka in 1705. See the account in Sheldon, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-4.

<sup>40</sup> Dore, *op. cit.*, p. 2.



nineteenth century opened. Urban culture may have reached an unusually high level for a semi-feudal society; rural life may have undergone substantial reorganization as town and country merchant capitalists organized the specialized production of food, raw materials, and manufactures; and the balance of economic and political power may have been slowly and imperceptibly shifting away from the Tokugawa in favour of the south-western provinces, whose hostile barons were, it will be remembered, too powerful in the early seventeenth century to be eliminated. Nevertheless, the spread of commerce and the rise of the merchants had not destroyed the political and economic structure laid down in the early seventeenth century. Not only was the bourgeoisie denied formal political and social status, it was still subject to control (albeit erratic at times) by the domain and Tokugawa governments, whose use of guilds and monopolies, privileges as official exchange-dealers, and arbitrary measures of various kinds, effectively split it into competing groups whose interests were often opposed. The isolation of the country, particularly the virtual elimination of foreign trade, was of enormous importance. It meant that there were fewer opportunities for independent action, and also that a potent catalyst of change was lacking. The country was still characterized by enormous regional variations in economic and social development, with largely autonomous provinces able to exert great and diverse influences on the patterns of production, distribution, and consumption. The merchant class was, in the absence of foreign trade, proportionately more dependent upon the feudal authorities for privileges. As the eighteenth century wore on, the organization of trade and industry became more, not less, rigid and there is reason to suspect that attempts to raise revenue from commerce in the second century of Tokugawa rule failed because that commerce itself was not expanding very rapidly, if it was expanding at all, in certain decades. Population decreased at times, and since urbanization, with the possible exception of Edo, could not have increased significantly, the country was in an economic straitjacket.

## VIII

The economic and demographic trends of the early nineteenth century are not easy to interpret. There is evidence that population began to rise slowly after 1800, in contrast to the fluctuations of the half century from 1750 to 1800. There are several possible explanations of this change in trend: the inefficiency of the feudal classes in many areas

may have increased and enabled further evasion of taxation, leaving larger surpluses in the countryside; the more energetic domains of the south-west and north-east apparently made greater efforts to extend the area of cultivated land, engaging in determined efforts at land reclamation, and there is some evidence of faster population growth in these areas;<sup>41</sup> the incidence of natural disaster may have been rather less severe; the improvements in agricultural practice and further changes in organization may have operated through increased specialization to shift national production onto a higher level. But none is entirely satisfactory, and even in combination these variables were more likely to cancel than to reinforce one another. The south-west, for instance, experienced a healthier demographic trend than the Kinai or the Tōkaidō over the entire period from 1750 to 1850, but the biggest domains in this area became *more*, not less, efficient in tax collection although this was, it is true, associated with increasing productivity. In any case, it seems wrong to place too much emphasis on this change in trend, because although there was a very widespread tendency for population to increase between 1804 and 1834, the natural catastrophes of the 1830s caused a loss in population that was barely recovered by 1852, almost 20 years later; and even those regions, such as Kyūshū and Shikoku, which had enjoyed slowly increasing numbers from 1750, numbered fewer souls in 1852 than in 1834.<sup>42</sup> Since these were the regions which contained domains reputed to have tackled most successfully the economic problems of revenue and expenditure, and of production levels,<sup>43</sup> it looks as though even there the physical limits of population growth had been reached. Charles Sheldon has written in a similar vein about the state of the Japanese economy at the end of the Tokugawa period:<sup>44</sup> 'Basically, the population was simply too large, given the isolation of Japan, the limitations of the political structure, and the stage of technological development of agriculture and industry.'

Sheldon has also suggested<sup>45</sup> that if the increased agricultural productivity in the eighteenth century, as described in Smith, had resulted in actual increases in production and incomes (and disturbances

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Susan B. Hanley, 'Population Trends and Economic Development in Tokugawa Japan: The Case of Bizen Province in Okayama', *Daedalus*, Vol. 97, No. 2 (1968), pp. 622-35, esp. p. 631.

<sup>42</sup> See table 4 on p. 23 of Taeuber, *op. cit.*

<sup>43</sup> W. G. Beasley, 'Feudal Revenue at the Time of the Meiji Restoration', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. XIX, No. 3 (May 1960).

<sup>44</sup> Sheldon, "'Pre-Modern" Merchants and Modernization in Japan', *Modern Asian Studies*, 5, 3 (1971), p. 203.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 199-200.

by peasants, including abandonment of fields, could have counter-balanced these increases to some extent), remaining increases may have been largely pre-empted by affluent traders, usurers, capitalists and landlords, most of whom would be formally classed as peasants. Sheldon has also made the point<sup>46</sup> that the poor peasants' discontent and consciousness of their poverty was deepened by the presence in the villages of wealthy peasants obviously enjoying their prosperity. There is the additional point that if we had reliable population figures by class, they might show a continued significant shift from agricultural to non-agricultural population in the eighteenth century. If so, productivity per farm worker might easily increase without a consequent increase in total production, and the burden of having to support a larger non-producing population could even result in a decrease in the farm workers' share. Thus the majority of the peasants may well have suffered from increased oppression. Since the number of affluent peasants must have been relatively small, these facts must cast doubt upon the probability of a general increase in productivity in the eighteenth century.

It is, then, suggested that productivity levels at the end of the Tokugawa period were lower than has been argued by some writers, and that there is as much evidence in economic, social, and demographic trends to support this as there is to believe that the eighteenth century was an era of steadily rising standards of living for the mass of the Japanese people. Substantial progress in agriculture was, however, achieved during the Meiji period: enough to support both a rising population and the industrialization and modernization of the country.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>47</sup> See James I. Nakamura, *Agricultural Production and the Economic Development of Japan 1873-1922* (Princeton, 1966), for a strongly argued case against the view that the Meiji period witnessed a speeding-up of agricultural development. But see also criticisms of the Nakamura thesis in Rosovsky, 'Rumbles in the Ricefields', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. XXVII, No. 2 (February 1968); and Seymour Broadbridge, 'The Economic Development of Japan 1870-1920', *Journal of Development Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (January 1968).