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Some Misconceptions About the Economic History of Tokugawa Japan

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TRADITIONAL INTERPRETATIONS of Tokugawa Japan (1603-1867) tend to suggest that it was a static, repressive society with little evidence of social or economic change. The period is characterized as having subsistence agriculture, severely controlled commerce, and a rigidly enforced system of Confucian-based social and functional distinctions. Modern scholarship questions all of these assumptions. Urbanization and commercial expansion, the diffusion of processing and trade to the countryside, labor migrations, technological change in agriculture, and increased specialization in trade and handicraft industrial production all reflect the dynamics of a society in transition. There were boundaries on economic activity and social change, but they were far less rigid and less effectively enforced than most traditional analyses suggest.

One of the first English language discussions of the "quiet Transformation in Tokugawa Economic History" appeared in a 1971 article by Susan B. Hanley and Kozo Yamamura. (See the bibliography section for this and the following works discussed.) The dialogue was continued in Yamamura's "Toward a Reexamination of the Economic History of Tokugawa Japan, 1600-1867," (1973), Yamamura (1974), and his sections of Hanley and Yamamura, *Economic and Demographic Change in Preindustrial Japan, 1600-1868*

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(1977). Hanley and Yamamura are by no means the only Western contributors to the reinterpretation of Tokugawa economic history. Also important have been the contributions of Thomas C. Smith, E. S. Crawcour, William B. Hauser, and others. All have been heavily dependent on Japanese scholarship, while at the same time developing interpretations which often differ with those advanced in Japan. There is currently sufficient material available in Western languages, by Japanese and Western scholars, to obtain a good introduction to the new outlook on Tokugawa economic history.

Before discussing the revisions, it is appropriate to discuss the base from which revisions have deviated in analysis. Among the important "pre-Transformation" studies must be included Charles David Sheldon's *The Rise of the Merchant Class in Tokugawa Japan, 1600-1868* (1958), which summarizes much of the work of the Kyoto school of economic historians in Japan and offers an excellent bibliography. Also important are the two volumes in English by Honjo Eijiro, *The Social and Economic History of Japan*, (1935), and *Economic Theory and History of Japan in the Tokugawa Period* (1943). These, together with the work of Takizawa Matsuyo (1927), Tsuchiya Takao (1937), and Takekoshi Yosoburō (1930) are representative examples of the traditional non-Marxist interpretations available in English.

A significant aspect of the traditional base from which revisions are now being made is not well represented in English. Marxist scholarship plays a major role in Japanese historiography of the Tokugawa period. Many important examples of Marxist historiography are summarized in Mikio Sumiya and Koji Taira, eds., *An Outline of Japanese Economic History, 1603-1940* (1979) which deals with Japanese scholarship to 1962. Brief summaries are available in Yamamura (1973) and Hanley and Yamamura (1971, 1978), *Comité Japonais Des Sciences Historiques* (1960), and in the works of E. H. Norman (1940), John Dower (1975), and Jon Halliday (1975). From these works one can get a general impression of the kinds of analyses advanced by Marxist scholars, but they are limited in scope and often over-simplify their contributions.

The impact of Marxist historiography is perhaps most visible in textbook discussions of Tokugawa economic history. For example, the second edition of Hugh Borton's *Japan's Modern Century* notes of Tokugawa period peasants:

. . . most of them lived a primitive existence and were barely able to eke out enough to generate sufficient energy for themselves and their families to continue to cultivate their fields. They were taxed at least 50 per cent of their crop and were

forbidden to sell their lands, divide their property, or leave their occupation. . . . The increasing frequency of their uprisings . . . gave eloquent evidence that their economic plight was deteriorating (1970: 16-17).

This portrait of the down-trodden peasant is continued in Mikiso Hane's *Japan: A Historical Survey*, in which he states: "the average peasant led a hand-to-mouth existence. . ." and "toward the end of the Tokugawa era, as economic difficulties increased, uprisings began to break out with growing frequency," (1972: 171, 172-3).

Both Borton and Hane offer a dismal portrayal of Tokugawa peasants and reflect the largely negative interpretations of Japanese Marxist scholarship. That some farmers suffered hardships and that peasant uprisings occurred cannot be disputed, but more recent scholarship would vary the interpretation of the data. Many uprisings were in response to local economic difficulties. It is another question, however, whether or not they reflect widespread, long-term economic plight. The works of Smith (1958, 1969), Hauser (1974), Hanley and Yamamura (1977), Vlastos (1977), Nishikawa (1978), Akimoto (1981) and Nakamura (1981) discuss the increased involvement of farmers in handicraft industries and trade. By the mid-eighteenth century many farming communities offered opportunities for non-agricultural employment and by the nineteenth century this was true for most regions in Japan. New cash crops like cotton, indigo, sugar cane, tobacco, silk worms and rape-seed supplemented income from grains and often displaced them from fields as a result of their higher profit margins. Silk-reeling, the ginning, weaving, and dyeing of cotton, tool manufacture, weaving of straw mats and sandals, food processing, and many other sorts of handicraft production developed in the countryside. The goods produced were directed not merely at local consumption, but towards regional and even distant markets. This reflected not only the growth of new forms of rural by-employment or full-time employment, but also the growth of rural market consciousness. (Nakamura, 1981).

Do these new forms of non-agricultural employment in the countryside suggest rural poverty as claimed by some analysts, primarily Marxists, or new economic opportunities? Does increased trade in goods produced by rural households imply the development of new forms of exploitation for the rural poor by local entrepreneurs or the creation of additional sources of capital to be shared in the villages? In contrast to the subsistence level of living suggested by Borton and Hane, recent scholarship strongly supports the notion

that standards of living generally improved over the course of the Tokugawa period. This is also reflected in rising wage rates in the countryside for agricultural labor. Evidence from the Kinai region and elsewhere suggests that peasants were far better off in the late Tokugawa period than they had ever been previously. They were more educated, better clothed and fed, enjoyed access to a wide range of consumer goods, and possessed increased capital resources. That some were badly off cannot be disputed, but in the aggregate most were not. Peasant uprisings reflected local economic problems, dislocations in productivity or trade, and testify to the volatility of local economic life. They do not, however, suggest political uprisings by down-trodden peasants or indicate the development of anti-Tokugawa revolutionary fervor (Hanley and Yamamura 1977, Vlastos 1977, Nishikawa 1978, Akimoto 1978, Saito 1978).

Evidence of increased commercial agriculture, handicraft production, and trade all run counter to the image of a static society in rural Japan. Most villages were integrated into local marketing networks and many were tied into one of the large regional networks focusing on Osaka, Kyoto, Edo or the local castle town. Indications of inter-regional trade predate the Tokugawa period and the introduction of the *sankin kōtai* system of alternate attendance and the building of castle towns accelerated its development (Duffy and Yamamura 1971, Sasaki 1981, Nakamura 1981). The image of self-sufficient villages with subsistence levels of living conflicts with evidence on market responsive cropping patterns and new sources of non-agricultural income (Chambliss 1965, Smith 1969, Hauser 1974b, Hanley and Yamamura 1977, Akimoto 1981).

The static society image is also inconsistent with evidence of migrations from one region to another in search of economic opportunity. The castle towns as well as the central cities of Edo, Osaka, and Kyoto were populated with migrants from the countryside as well as with members of the samurai class who had been largely withdrawn from the land in the early Tokugawa period. Most cities were unable to reproduce themselves and were dependent on new migrants to maintain their population. The decline in urban population from the late-eighteenth century reflects the availability of better opportunities in the countryside and in rural market towns (Hayami 1973, Hanley 1973, Hanley and Yamamura 1977, Fruin 1973, 1978). Permanent migration was complemented by seasonal migration. Many farmers went to cities or market towns in search of by-employment opportunities in the slow season for farming. This was true not only for those in villages surrounding major urban centers, but also in areas distant from the Kinai and Kanto plains like

the Bōchō region studied by Smith (1969), Nishikawa (1978) and Akimoto (1981). Recent studies indicate that not only was the standard of living considerably above the subsistence level in this region, but that there was also a high rate of capital formation. As Akimoto notes:

The view that the Tokugawa economy was “stagnating” or had “zero growth” is unsupportable for reasons we have seen—high levels of consumption, and large surpluses which were successfully invested and which exceeded the rate of population growth. These factors created the base upon which Japan of the Meiji and subsequent periods parlayed into rapid economic growth (1981: 56).

It is increasingly apparent that many of the standard assumptions of Marxists and others who have emphasized the stagnant character of the Tokugawa economy and the subsistence level of living of most villagers are being disproven by the econometric analysis of the current generation of economic historians in Japan and the West.

Characteristic of Tokugawa economic policy was the effort to separate trade and handicraft production from agriculture. Consequently, in the late-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Tokugawa bakufu and various daimyo attempted to concentrate artisans and merchants in cities to segregate them from the peasants and ease the difficulties of regulating commerce. Authorized monopolies and monopsonies served to both license and restrict access to commerce and also provided a revenue source for the bakufu and daimyo. The diffusion of trade and handicraft industry from cities to market towns and villages reduced the impact of commercial regulations, was reflected in declining urban populations from the late-eighteenth century, and dramatically altered marketing patterns. This was also of major importance in undermining the distinctions between peasants, artisans, and merchants as by-employment opportunities expanded in the villages (Chambliss 1965, Duffy and Yamamura 1971, Hauser, 1974a,b). Market competition increased and the dominant position of urban merchant monopolies and monopsonies was significantly reduced, reflecting both expanded opportunities and increased market consciousness in the countryside (Nakamura, 1981). All of this testifies to the expansion of commerce and handicraft production in Tokugawa Japan.

A variety of factors contributed to the movement of trade and industry to the countryside. First, as noted by Saito (1978), was

the narrowing of the gap between urban and rural wages, at least in the region surrounding the city of Osaka. In competition for scarce labor supplies, rural wage levels increased and people stayed in the villages. This retarded the growth of Kinai industries and Saito questions the two region model advanced by Yamamura and suggests a more complex model is necessary (Yamamura 1973, Hanley and Yamamura 1977). Country places also had other advantages over castle towns and cities in attracting and holding labor. They included:

- (1) Nearness to raw materials and water power; (2) closeness to the rural market for goods and services; (3) tighter and more reliable networks of face-to-face relations at a time when . . . such relations . . . were the principal basis of security in commercial transactions; (4) the ability of workers in the country to shift back and forth between farming and other employments; and (5) greater freedom from taxation and guild restrictions (Smith, 1973: 144).

Market consciousness, active participation in rural trade and handi-craft production, and integration into regional market systems characterized the economic activities of many villagers by the end of the Tokugawa period and provided a headstart on both human capital and capital stock which would be essential to the post-1868 experience of modern economic growth in Japan.

This raises a major analytical theme about some of the continuities which exist between the economic history of Tokugawa and Meiji Japan and offers a new statistical support for earlier non-quantitative analyses (Chambliss 1965, Hauser 1977-78). To quote again from Akimoto:

There were two legacies bequeathed by the Tokugawa period to the modern (post-1868) economy . . . The Meiji economy was able to use the technology and capital stock accumulated during the last years of Tokugawa rule . . . (and further) channels for directing savings into investment had been institutionalized. . . . Although the introduction of new institutions was "from above," the driving force of the Tokugawa legacy behind development came "from below." The development of the Japanese economy was a story of continuity (1981: 56).

Recent work in Tokugawa economic history thus challenges many of the assumptions which have been offered by institutional and

Marxist historians and supports the new interpretations with econometric analysis of large sets of aggregate data. Demographic history has revised many of the assumptions about the apparently static population of the period. Analysis of by-employment patterns and capital formation has shown that improved standards of living characterized the experience of many Japanese in the latter half of the Tokugawa period, at a time when the demographic data previously seemed to suggest otherwise. Recent analyses of monetization and market integration (Duffy and Yamamura 1971) and monetary policy (Ohkura and Shimbo 1978) indicate the extent to which the Tokugawa economy was commercialized and monetized and help explain the difficulties experienced by the Tokugawa bakufu in continuing its policies of economic regulation. While the conclusions are not necessarily new they reinforce work done earlier by non-Marxist historians in reinterpreting the economic history of Tokugawa Japan.

The suggestion that the rapid economic growth of the Meiji period (1868-1912) was a continuation of trends visible during the Tokugawa period is one of the major interpretive contributions of recent scholarship on Japanese economic history. E. S. Crawcour noted in a 1965 article on "The Tokugawa Heritage" that Japan's modern economic growth: "no longer seems so miraculous, . . . partly because . . . Japan a century ago was less backward and less feudal than was once thought." (17) This is in contrast to the "relative backwardness" for Japan claimed by Rosovsky in 1961. (77) Crawcour attempts to quantify the value of Japanese productivity for the 1860s in an effort to compare late Tokugawa with early Meiji data. While the effort is flawed by the absence of adequate data, he is able to offer some useful interpretative suggestions, many of which have been reinforced by more recent studies. He estimates, for example, that half to two-thirds of agricultural output was marketed in one form or another, a notion quite inconsistent with the Marxist claim that most agriculture was subsistence in nature. (41) He views the Japanese economy in the 1860s as "reasonably, but not outstandingly productive for a traditional economy. It had a high potential for saving and was already showing signs of quickening economic growth." (44) Other features of the economy which made it potentially responsive to economic stimuli were a well-developed market system, a comparatively well-educated population which was economically motivated, and a government which was in a position to play a major role in economic modernization. (44) Crawcour thus finds in the Tokugawa heritage much that would be of value to modern economic growth.

Thomas C. Smith (1969) also suggests links between the Tokugawa experience and modern economic growth, particularly those which emerged from widespread by-employment activities. He selects three features of the Tokugawa legacy which were noteworthy. First, Japan's modern economic growth was to a large extent in traditional industries in which modest technical and organizational improvements aided growth. Examples include agriculture, food-processing, fishing, lumbering, residential construction, ceramics, and woodworking. Many of these industries preserved their rural character and were closely tied to techniques and labor force from the Tokugawa period farming community. Second, many of the workers in modern industry were recruited from farm families. Because of by-employment experience they had craft, clerical, and managerial skills which were easily adapted to industrial technology and the factory as work-place. The by-employment tradition also prepared people to leave their communities in search of new economic opportunities. Third, by-employments were also important for their contributions to economic growth without the need for population growth in preindustrial Japan. (Smith, 1969, 711) Here we find additional elements of continuity between Tokugawa and Meiji Japan.

Of major importance to the industrial development of modern Japan was the availability of economic surplus to help support the costs of industrialization. Crucial to the creation of this surplus was population control, a long misunderstood feature of Tokugawa demographic history. Recent studies by Susan B. Hanley (1972, 1973), Hanley and Yamamura (1972, 1977), Thomas C. Smith (1977), and Akira Hayami (1967, 1968, 1979, 1980) illustrate the value of demographic history and strongly suggest that family limitation was used to enhance the economic status and standard of living of many Japanese farm households. As noted by Hanley and Yamamura (1972):

. . . Japan had living standards and a rate of population growth which made possible a surplus in the economy, and there is substantial evidence to show that such a surplus existed. Thus, with the coming of industrialization the economy was able to support entirely from indigenous capital, most of which was contributed from the land tax, both industrialization and a population which began to grow at a faster pace. (486)

Demographic patterns established in the Tokugawa period are thus of major importance to modern economic growth in Japan and differentiate the Japanese case from that of developing nations in the

twentieth century. This argument is reinforced by a 1971 article by Kelley and Williamson. They note in their conclusions, “. . . much of Meiji Japan’s impressive performance can be explained by unique demographic features.” (774)

In their 1977 book Hanley and Yamamura expand this argument with additional data and analysis. They see continued economic growth in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries together with a slowdown in population growth as contributing to a rising standard of living and the creation of economic surplus for many Japanese households. They also view limitations in family size as a conscious choice made to improve or maintain standards of living and status. (320-1)

One additional legacy which the Tokugawa period contributed to modern economic growth was education. Japan, by nineteenth century European standards, had a highly literate population at the end of the Tokugawa period. As noted by R. P. Dore (1965), this meant that those with literacy had a positive attitude towards acquiring new knowledge, accepted the possibility of self-improvement, and that the intellectual resources of the country were to a large extent accessible for new purposes. Also important, communication between rulers and the people was greatly facilitated by the ability to use written directives. (101-3) As Dore goes on to emphasize: “it was important that the Japanese populace was not just a sack of potatoes.” (104) A relatively literate population made a significant contribution to the potential for economic growth in Meiji Japan.

This brief summary does not do justice to the important contributions of recent studies of Tokugawa history. What is important to note is that as a consequence of recent analytical revisions, the relationship between the economic histories of Tokugawa and Meiji Japan are far more obvious than was previously the case. The contributions of Tokugawa period improvements in such areas as human capital; capital formation; craft, clerical, and managerial skills; marketing systems; by-employment experience; population limitation; and market consciousness to the rapid industrialization and economic growth of modern Japan are increasingly apparent.

Recent scholarship on the economic history of Tokugawa Japan has brought the Marxist model of a stagnant economy into question. It is no longer possible to argue convincingly that Tokugawa peasants existed to be exploited by the samurai class and the wealthy former warriors (*gonō*) in the villages. The rise of the merchant class can no longer be held accountable for samurai poverty as the wealth they accumulated added to the total wealth of the

society. It is also too simplistic to argue that increased rural involvement in trade and handicraft production was at the expense of both urban merchants and peasants. The "zero-sum" model is not supported by contemporary data. Rather than the bleak picture which has been painted by the Marxists, recent economic historians are presenting a far more dynamic and positive image of the Tokugawa economy.¹ The Tokugawa legacy was not left behind with the Meiji Restoration. Instead, it played a major role in the economic development of Meiji Japan.

It is clear that the "new economic history" is having a major impact on the historiography of the Tokugawa period. One of the most important features of this work is the volume of new data which it is generating. The data, independently of how it is analyzed, is raising serious questions about some of the assumptions which have been applied to Tokugawa economic history. The evidence on human capital formation, improved capital stock, internal migration, and the diffusion of trade and handicraft industry throughout the society makes the notion of a subsistence economy in Japanese villages difficult to accept. The evidence for large scale marketing of agricultural output questions the concept of the self-sufficient village community. The evidence on improved standards of living challenges the assumption that the economy in the second half of the Tokugawa period was stagnant.

New data on the economic history of Tokugawa Japan necessitates revisions in traditional and Marxist interpretations, many of which are no longer consistent with the available evidence.² Whatever theory or methodology is applied the availability of a vastly expanded data base offers new challenges to historians to suggest interpretations which are more consistent with the materials now available. One major outcome of this work is the awareness of the continuities between Tokugawa and Meiji economic growth. The foundation layed during the Tokugawa period is now tied to the capacity of Japan to industrialize so rapidly after 1868. This helps to explain the Japanese experience and to differentiate it from other Asian countries in the nineteenth century. It also indicates parallels with the experience of England and western European nations and suggests why it was Japan, among non-western nations, which made the transition to modern economic growth first.³

Notes

1. For a further discussion of the Marxist view of Tokugawa economic history see Yamamura (1973), pp. 510-16.

2. The Marxist response to the new interpretations of the economic history of Tokugawa Japan have taken two forms: first, questioning the methodology used by the "new economic historians;" and, second, more fundamental questions about the representative, or non-representative, character of the data base. The second is the more telling criticism. Comprehensive data does not exist for all communities and it is difficult to ascertain whether, in fact, the villages for which good data exist represent the range of economic experience of Tokugawa period Japanese. Are more prosperous villages more likely to preserve their records? Can we be confident that a comprehensive collection of villages are represented in the studies published to date? Are the poverty and the negative impacts of commercial agriculture seen as characteristic by the Marxists as uncommon as the new studies seem to suggest? These are serious questions and deserve serious consideration. More work is required before they can safely and confidently be laid to rest. Personally, based on recent cliometric studies and non-quantitative work, I am convinced that the negative features of Tokugawa economic history have been over-emphasized. However, since a definitive interpretation is not likely, the issues under discussion here are worthy of further attention.

3. Stanley Engerman has suggested that many aspects of Tokugawa economic history are consistent with the English experience prior to industrialization. In both countries internal migration patterns and long-range changes in economic activity provided the foundations for industrialization and modern economic growth. It is the long periods of preparation in England and Japan and the continuities between the traditional and modern economies which makes them of special interest as case studies of modern economic growth. The author is grateful to Professor Engerman for this insight and other suggestions for revisions.

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