INTRODUCTION

Much debate has ensued concerning the definition of the term feudalism used in Japanese history. Most would agree that the term is suitable as a politico-legal concept to describe the vassalage and enfeoffment practices that formed the backbone of samurai warrior class rule over land and population since the 12th century. However, scholars also recognize that during the Tokugawa period (1600–1867) Japanese feudalism underwent great change. The institution of government authority by centralized controls over social and economic life was characteristic of the Tokugawa takeover, which ended the prolonged civil war between many domain lords and largely removed the pockets of local power in the rural areas. In fact, the standard term used in Japanese scholarship for the period has been “centralized feudalism” to distinguish from the more decentralized and unstable feudal order of the previous warring states period between the 15th and the 16th centuries. The isolationist policy and strict social regulation of the Tokugawa order have warranted much criticism especially by Japanese scholars for whom the period has been an “ancient régime”. Yet, it has also been undeniable that the results of the Tokugawa measures were quite successful for the rulers. The “Pax Tokugawa” peace of the military rulers, the Shoguns who had come the power in the 17th century, lasted for more than 200 years until the eve of the Meiji Restoration of 1868.

On a national scale, the Tokugawa polity differed from the centuries of regional power as it was a careful balance between vassal domain lords (daimyō) domains (han) and a national government, the Bakufu, headed by the Shoguns. By 1868, the Bakufu controlled one fourth of the agricultural territory of Japan, the rest being divided among 270 private domains. While daimyō households were autonomous in their internal affairs, only the fudai, the “inner lords”, or, those who were the vassals...
of the Tokugawa family prior to the decisive Sekigahara battle of 1606 which had brought them to power, had the privilege to take part in the national government together with Tokugawa relatives and retainers. The other lords, adversaries who had accepted vassalage only after the battle, were considered untrustworthy. Called the tozama, the “outer lords”, they were kept out of Baku of service. All received their fiefs from the Shogun who ruled on behalf of the Emperor, the religious-communal head of the native Shinto faith residing in Kyoto. The Shoguns, thereby, had systematized the vassalage practices of feudal society to institute a uniform legal foundation for land tenure and political order in the country.3

The social order of the regime also exhibited rough similarities to those of medieval Europe, although there were social trends that gave what has been also considered as an “early modern” character to Tokugawa society. Here, the Japanese experience was quite different, at least, from the classical image of feudality gained of medieval Europe. Continuing a late 16th century trend, the Tokugawa Shoguns established a hereditary class order; the ruling samurai warriors, vs. the peasants, the merchants and artisans. The peasants, tied to the land, were cultivators and sole tax payers to respective samurai governments. However, unlike the serfs of Europe, over time, the Tokugawa cultivators, mostly small and middle landholders, had come to resemble a landed peasantry. Furthermore, unlike rural manorial lords, the samurai did not have direct ties with their “official” tenures. Forcibly separated from their rural fiefs by the initiative of the daimyō in the late 16th century, they had transformed into urban bureaucrats and soldiers in the service of the domain lords, or, the Tokugawa Shoguns, and resided in towns and cities. While the samurai had entered the direct service of the lords and received stipends from the various governments, the peasant villages had been left on their own. No longer the cultivators of rural seignors, the Tokugawa peasants had become subjects and tax payers of governing authorities.

For many historians of the pre-war generation (WW II), whether influenced by Marxist thought, or not, the Tokugawa order made things worse for the commoners who were now suppressed and exploited by the arm of government. However, recent studies in Japan and abroad have tended to view the Tokugawa order in a better light, emphasizing the growing urbanization of society, sophistication of government and other new trends. More important, the great late 17th and 18th centuries have been recognized as a period of change with an “agricultural revolution” that fed the growth of a market economy. There were economic changes that acted as a stimulus toward new cultural trends reflective of heterodox ideas and tastes among samurai and commoner alike.4 Particularly, the emergence of merchants, landlords, well-off peasants out of the traditional economy is well treated in a number of important works on the subject that also link the period with modern Japan.5

Yet, the Tokugawa peace suddenly ended in 1854 with the arrival of Commodore Perry and his black ships to force the Shoguns to accept “free trade”. The event instigated a political crisis over the signature of the treaties in 1858, leading to the demise of the Baku of the Bakufu and the establishment of a new regime, only a decade later, in 1868. The standard account of the Meiji Restoration is one of political loyalties that concerns moves among the ruling class to replace the Shoguns who had “lost face” by signing the treaty without the explicit approval of the imperial court in Kyoto. Accordingly, the 1854 crisis led to an anti-Bakufu movement among young and ambitious samurai of lower status, who took advantage of the political vacuum