Population growth and economic development have been related to each other in almost all known societies, but scholars have been unable to explain which came first: it is a typical chicken-and-egg problem. Moreover, since population growth within a closed geographic area may take place either through increased fertility or decreased mortality, the relationship between population and the economy is a complex one. For example, on the one hand, we could assume that population growth first took place when ecological changes that produced good harvests induced an increasing birth rate. This in turn may have led to economic development through the extension of effective demand in a growing population that mobilized more resources. On the other hand, economic development may have first raised the standard of living and consequently brought down mortality, thereby creating a population increase. Generally speaking, economists prefer the latter explanation, while other social scientists prefer the former; and historians waver between the two alternatives. But recent scholarship reveals that population growth, whether it stemmed from rising fertility or declining mortality, has produced economic development from early to recent periods of history. The Ester Boserup thesis holds that from the period of slash-and-burn agriculture to that of the medieval European three-field agrarian system, population growth or even pressure has forced humankind to use land more efficiently, and consequently, has engendered economic improvement. B.H. Slicher van Bath collected much evidence to indicate that in medieval to early modern Western Europe, the development of agriculture, technology, and more efficient land use, contributed to the population growth that preceded economic development. The most forceful theory of “population growth preceding economic development” has been put forth by Douglas C. North, who holds that prior population change was the most decisive factor in economic change in Western European history. A neglected study by R.G. Wilkinson also declares that population growth is the key factor behind social change in world history.

However, in the contemporary world, we know that developing nations are suffering from high population growth that prevents economic development. China, for example, which was once proud of its huge population and its high growth rate, has made a complete turn-about in policy and is now conducting a “one child per family” campaign. This is a great paradox: in the past, population growth preceded economic development, but today it obstructs such development. What is the truth in the relationship between population and economic
growth in the Northeast Asian countries? Since I lack a thorough knowledge of the several millennia-long history of this region, I will limit my comments to Tokugawa Japan (1603–1868) and Ch’ing China (1644–1912).

TOKUGAWA JAPAN

The population of Tokugawa Japan as a whole probably tripled, but it increased after many ups and downs during that 265 year period and evinced marked regional diversities. Roughly speaking, the 17th century was one of rapid population growth; the 18th, one of so-called “stagnation”; and the 19th, one of gently sloping increase. From fragmentary local records, I have calculated that the national population in 1600 might have been 12 million plus or minus 2 million. We know from the population surveys conducted by several territorial lords (daimyo) and regional studies in 17th century rural Japan, that the population increased at a high annual rate of 0.5 to 0.8 percent.

It may be rash to conclude that these results indicate the population trend of Japan as a whole because this increase resulted from the establishment of the small family unit in rural society during the 17th century, which was accompanied by a high married proportion compared to the situation in the preceding period when there was a low proportion and when non-married subordinate males and females were the main resource of labor power. But I want to stress that Japan obtained the potential for an increase in population because of the emergence of this small family farming system: thereafter the population could increase at any time as long as there was no need or force to check it.

In the 18th century, national population surveys were conducted by the central government (shogunate) every 6 years from 1721 to 1846, and these provide the demographer with unusually good data. Japan’s total population in the years covered by these surveys did not vary above 28 million or below 24 million, it is true. But we should note that these surveys contained serious underestimations. They excluded the warrior class population and the child populations in some domains. Though we have but imperfect supplementary data, an underestimation of 5 million is by no means unrealistic, and when this figure is added, we obtain a population of 29 to 33 million in this century.

Fortunately several surveys recording population province by province (there were 68 provinces in total) were carried out, and these permit us to discover regional population trends in this century. These trends show clear regional differences. In the northeast, the population declined by 30 percent, but in the southwest, it increased considerably. It is very interesting that in the most economically advanced areas, that surrounding Edo and that surrounding Kyoto and Osaka, the regional population almost stagnated. Village data in these regions show that rural areas had a natural rate of increase; that is, higher fertility and lower mortality. The very economic development of urban areas reduced populations there through lower fertility and higher mortality. In short, the negative feedback function between economic-urban development and regional population trends in pre-industrial societies noted by E.A. Wrigley was evident.

In rural areas, almost all daughters and sons who did not or could not succeed to the family headship left for urban areas to find work. Some settled there