Demographic Aspects of a Village in Tokugawa Japan

INTRODUCTION

Tokugawa Japan bequeathed to us an abundant supply of materials for population study. Although these materials cannot be compared to modern scientific demographic data, they are excellent for their day. Japan in the Tokugawa period was a rare example of a well documented pre-modern state.

There are two reasons for this fortunate situation. First, when Japan was finally unified in the late sixteenth century, the shogun and the provincial feudal lords became very much interested in the quantitative aspects of the regions they governed and hence conducted surveys on the size and population of their domains. These early surveys were the first attempt of its sort since the eighth and ninth centuries when a type of census had been carried out.

Second, as a result of the strict ban put on Christianity by the Tokugawa government, a registration of the religious faith of every individual was carried out every year. The people were ordered to report what religious body they belonged to and to avow themselves Buddhists. In general, all the people, both urban and rural, were ordered to enter the name of their family temple in the register of their town or village, the basic unit for this national survey.

This religious registration system was put into effect on a nationwide level about 1670. At first, the system had nothing to do with census-taking, but later it also came to be utilized for that purpose. Besides the names and the family temples of individuals, their sex, age, and relationship to their household head, and such matters as the reason and the date for any change in residence were entered. The form of these registrations differed in various parts of the country. The fact, however, that census-like registrations existed in many provinces, and especially the fact that they were conducted annually, should be considered a significant event facilitating the demographic study of the Tokugawa period. As a result of the existence of the two types of data described above, Japan is fairly well endowed with demographic materials.

This report is the result of a demographic study I made using the example of Yokouchi village in Suwa county in the province of Shinano. The materials for this village are, from the point of view of a continuous study over a period of years, the best which I have discovered to date. I have made a study of various aspects of the demographic history of this village by combining the traditional method of...
population study with a tracing of the demographic behavior of families through
the method of family reconstitution.

In Suwa han, the domain to which this village belonged, shumon aratame cho or
religious registrations were drawn up for every village for 201 years from 1671 to
1871. The form of the survey continued to be almost the same throughout the
period. There are shumon aratame cho extant for the village of Yokouchi for 144
years out of this 201 year period.

In general, there is no one method for determining to what extent these
materials can be trusted, but for Yokouchi village the materials for the first half
of the period can be relied upon to a greater extent than those of the latter half.
This generalization is based on the extent to which the materials are continuous,
on the extent to which births are reported, and on the extent to which the reasons
for any changes are recorded. Thus, if this span of 201 years is divided into
25-year periods, the reliability of Period II (1701–1725) is the highest in every
respect. There is the least amount of continuity in the materials from Period V
(1776–1800) on. Also, the recording of births is incomplete in Periods VII and
VIII (1826–1871).

The method used for studying these materials was first, at the most basic level,
to record on cards—one card for every family for every year—the name, sex, age,
and relationship to the head of the household of every person in the family and to
note the reasons for any changes in the household. Using these cards it was
possible to make horizontal studies on the village for any year for which there
were materials. And because there is no break in the continuity of the materials of
over four years, it was possible to make vertical times studies on each family. The
next step was to record on one card the demographic behavior of each couple in
order to obtain from the basic cards more detailed material concerning marriage
and births. For this it was possible to adopt the method developed in the 1950s by
Henry Fleury.

This method of dealing with the basic materials, that is of using the family
reconstitution method carried out in the studies on the historical demography of
Western Europe, was extremely valuable in tracing long-term demographic
changes. And because the shumon aratame cho for this village record all family
members in one place, family reconstitution was extremely easy to carry out,
in comparison with the work European demographers have in reconstructing
families from birth, marriage, and death records.

The village under study, Yokouchi, is situated on the edge of the Suwa basin in
Nagano prefecture in central Japan. (Fig. 11.1) At the beginning of the Tokugawa
period, this village was estimated at 350 koku on the lord’s cadastre, which meant
that the cultivated land produced about 1,800 bushels of grain. The altitude,
about 2,600 feet above sea level, is so high that agriculture cannot be carried out
in the winter. In the second half of the nineteenth century, sericulture and the
manufacture of spinning silk were developed in the Suwa basin, but it is not clear
how these developments were related to population growth.