The Kan/Min Division of Woodland in Early Meiji, 1871–76

To put the matter boldly, the Meiji government’s 1870s–1880s program of woodland reorganization created the greatest conflict between government and people in the entire history of Japan. It was in essence a contest for control of the realm. As adumbrated in Chapter 1, it pitted the government (kan) against the 80 percent of Japan’s people (min) then living in the villages of Japan Proper (Naichi), nearly all of whom had a direct stake in the issue. Moreover, each side was convinced that it had the more righteous and more important claim. Hence the stubbornness of the struggle.

The contest began around 1871, and it became most heated during the 1880s. There was no real ending date; the struggle just gradually petered out between the 1890s and 1920s or thirties. One can, however, point to 1889 as the year when the government in Tokyo essentially completed its effort at forest consolidation. And the basic character of the kan/min struggle was established by 1876. So here we focus on those formative years of the seventies.

In the outcome each side secured a piece of the pie. But the path to that outcome was extraordinarily convoluted and confusing, and it was extremely difficult for everyone involved. The woodland, too, paid a high price, with decades of effort required to undo the damage.

DIMENSIONS OF THE PROBLEM

The issue of woodland organization was in part a by-product of early Meiji land-tax reform, an undertaking that encompassed both arable and woodland (as well as urban property). But in greater part it sprang from changing perceptions of government need and woodland value and the changing policies that resulted.

Both the land-tax and forest issues have been extensively studied by Japanese scholars. And solid essays on the land-tax reform have appeared in English. These latter, however, have focused on the reform of arable