Chapter I

The Village Enters the Modern Era

1866–1885

Born in Troubled Times

February 20, 1866.
The village of Hashimoto lies nestled on the northwest edge of the Kantō Plain, tranquil and compact. Its one hundred or so houses are clustered on either side of a dirt-packed highway that, at the end of the village, crosses a stream over an arched wooden bridge, and begins its slow ascent up into the hills. A handful of travelers are on the road: a villager carrying a heavy load of brushwood down from a wooded hillside; a farmer returning from the Kamimizo market with a load of fishmeal fertilizer; a wholesaler looking to buy silk thread to take down to the foreign merchants in Yokohama; a merchant with a pair of pack mules, stopping at one of the village’s roadside teahouses; and a pair of pilgrims, returning from a visit to Kamakura’s famous Hachiman Shrine. The sound of their straw sandals on the packed earth barely stirs the somnolent village. A cow lows in a stable. A few chickens squawk from their cramped coop. The pale winter sun casts long shafts, hazy with the dust of the Kantō soil, between the ramshackle wooden houses of the villagers.

Spread out around the houses clustered near the road is a neat patchwork of fields, stretching off into the distance. Many of the fields are fallow, recently plowed and waiting for the spring wheat crop to be planted. Where they have been plowed, the soil is a deep black color.
This is the Kantō loam: a rich, crumbly volcanic mixture that lies three or more meters deep across the plain. Other fields are planted with mulberry trees two to three meters high, spread out in even rows, leafless as they await the warmth of spring. Patched in among the irregularly shaped fields are small groves of woods—a clump of ancient oaks, beeches, and cedars around the Zuikōji Temple bordering the village, and several groves of regularly spaced chestnut trees.

Immediately to the north of the village the road climbs into the first of the hills leading up to the Goten Pass. The hillsides are heavily forested with pine, beech, and chestnut trees. These are the foothills of the Kantō mountain range. On the other side of the Goten Pass, the road descends to the market town of Hachiōji, before climbing again into mountains that rise in craggy ranks of forest and rock, stretching off blue and green into the far distance. To the southwest, the setting is even more dramatic. A couple of kilometers away, the fields come to an end at the banks of the Sagami River, which has just descended from the mountains and still flows fast, strong, and icy cold. On the other side of the river, the mountain peaks are tipped with snow. In the summer months hundreds of pilgrims will pass through Hashimoto on the route to these high mountains. Rising behind them all, floating in the limpid air, is an unreal sight: Mount Fuji, its smooth sides dipped in snow, reflecting the sunlight in a blue-white sheen against the pale blue of the winter sky.

The houses of Hashimoto are for the most part small and plain. Built of wooden frames, with walls made of a stucco paste of mud and straw, and thatched roofs on low-hanging eaves, they sit close to the road surrounded by a few fruit trees, a bare work area, and perhaps a shed for storage. The houses offer solid shelter, but they reflect lives of simplicity and bare sustenance. Some of the owners are squatting in their dusty yards, doing winter chores—the fields are fallow after the winter wheat harvest, and now the farmers are making sandals and rope out of the straw. Their faces are dark from a lifetime out of doors, spare and angled with the simplicity of their food and the life of constant manual labor. Bareheaded in the chill winter afternoon, the men wear their hair pulled back from the forehead and closely knotted at the top of their heads. Their women work by their sides, the little children playing in the dirt.

Near the top of the village are a few simple teahouses and an inn, catering to the needs of passing travelers. Above them, close to the stream that marks the boundary, are a handful of grander dwellings.
Their compounds are enclosed by high fences of bamboo and wood, and gated to keep out intruders. The main houses are large imposing structures, and the compounds contain a variety of subsidiary buildings—storehouses of brick and plaster, lodges for retired family heads, stables for horses and cattle, well houses, and work sheds.

The last house in the village, nestled against the flowing stream and protected from prying eyes by a high wall, is the compound of the Aizawa family. Its main house is an imposing building, plastered white, with black wooden bars on the ground floor windows. Its distinctive high gables allow light and air into the upper floor, which is used for silkworm cultivation. It is roofed with fresh straw thatch and surrounded by a beautifully cultivated garden of ornamental trees and carefully trimmed bushes.

In this house, a familiar drama is taking place. Riu, thirty-one years old, is giving birth. She is attended by the local midwife, a woman from the village's lower class who is trained in the lore of childbirth. Also present is her mother-in-law, the matriarch of the Aizawa family, who is directing the maid to bring whatever is needed to make Riu as comfortable as possible. Riu's four-year-old son, Kenjirō, and her two daughters are being cared for by the komori, a young village girl hired to live with the family as a child-minder and maid. Riu's mother, from the Suzuki family in Asakawa village, two hours walk away over the Goten Pass, has been sent for. A farm hand will accompany her back to Hashimoto, where she will share with her daughter the first hours of this new life. Riu's husband, thirty-six-year-old Yasujirō, is busy with his village and farming duties. His job is to stay out of the way of the women's activities.

The new baby is a son. His birth is a cause for celebration, of course, but not on the same scale as the birth of Kenjirō, four years earlier. Throughout the first part of his life, the younger brother will live in the shadow of his elder brother's position as heir to the headship of the Aizawa family. A week after the birth, the family celebrates with rice and red beans, and Yasujirō registers the birth of the child with the family temple. His name is to be Kikutarō—“Chrysanthemum Boy.”

The Aizawa family is the wealthiest in Hashimoto. Yasujirō possesses more than fifty hectares of farmland in the fields surrounding Hashimoto, as well as extensive holdings of forest land. He is also the hereditary nanushi, or headman responsible to the feudal lord, of part of Hashimoto village. Although Hashimoto is a village of only one hundred families, it is divided between four different feudal lords, part
of an immensely complicated patchwork of ownership and fief that characterize the land of the Kantō Plain. Because this land is readily accessible from the capital, the government of the shogun has allocated much of it to its immediate retainers—the hatamoto or bannermen—as a tax base for their income needs. Other pieces of land in the area are direct possessions of the shogun, and pay taxes to his official representative, the daikan, based in Shinagawa on the outskirts of Edo (the shogunal capital—later renamed Tokyo). Still others belong to one or other of the small independent domains that dot the area.

Yasujirō owes his allegiance, and service, to the Fujisawa family. The Fujisawa are the most powerful of the local hatamoto lords, with land valued at a total of fifteen hundred koku (the standard unit of income, one koku being equivalent to roughly sixty kilograms of rice). The greatest obligation of the villagers of Hashimoto is to pay taxes. As nanushi, it is Yasujirō’s job to apportion these taxes among the villagers, supervise their collection, and deliver them to the Fujisawa family in Edo.

This relationship is both close and personal. The Fujisawa are the masters of their portion of Hashimoto in a very real sense. The villagers of Hashimoto provide not only tax money, but also personal services to the Fujisawa family: maids and servants to Fujisawa family members; loans or special payments to individual members of the Fujisawa family; and the delivery of local produce. The villagers are forced to observe a protocol of abject humility in all communications with their feudal lords, even while occasionally protesting at excessive exactions. In the feudal conception of the time, the farmers are lowly commoners whose function is to feed their warrior lords. In spite of the rulers’ acknowledgment of the importance of farmers to the economy and sustenance of the realm, the truth is that farmers are powerless and despised by their samurai rulers. And yet, the samurai are also deeply dependent on the farmers, for the land is the source of the lords’ livelihood.

The Aizawa family occupies an ambiguous status within the oppressively hierarchical world created by the Tokugawa shoguns. As landlord farmers, they enjoy a larger income than many of the ruling samurai class. The Aizawa’s registered annual income is equivalent to seventy koku of rice—roughly equivalent to the stipend of a lower middle-ranking samurai in shogunal employ. In reality, the Aizawa are probably closer in wealth to an upper-middle-class samurai family, as villagers typically seek ways to understate their wealth, while the notional salaries of samurai retainers are usually subject to various deductions
to help the government out with its perennial financial difficulties. But the protocol of the day requires farmers like the Aizawa to submit humbly to the often arrogant behavior of their samurai “masters.” Farmers, including headmen unless specially exempted, are not permitted to use family names (this rule is generally ignored by wealthier families, except in official documents). And their clothing and housing are strictly controlled, with silk and other luxury items banned (again, many wealthier farmers ignore these edicts).

Four years earlier, an American journalist wrote after passing through Hashimoto and its surrounding villages: “To the stranger who wanders among their quiet hamlets, seeing so much of worldly peace and apparent content, and certainly so little of poverty or distress, there seems to be nothing wanting to their rustic happiness.” The villagers of Hashimoto are, indeed, in many ways privileged. Their land is blessed with a mild climate, although it lacks the irrigation resources to plant wet paddy rice, Japan’s most valued food crop. Hashimoto is well located on a major road, with direct access both to the capital and to the international port of Yokohama. These are the conditions that have given rise to Hashimoto’s major economic activities, the production of wheat and silk. Between them, these products provide the villagers with the cash income they need to pay their taxes and buy essential commodities, including fertilizer and rice, which they prefer as a staple over the locally grown grains.

The relatively warm climate of the Kantô region—protected from northerly winds by the mountains that surround it on three sides—allows the villagers to plant two crops a year, one in the winter and one in the spring. They plant a variety of grains, including barley, rye, dry-field rice, and millet as well as wheat. The farmers raise their crops with little help from animals or machinery: Hashimoto has only seven horses, all in the hands of the wealthiest families. All of the farming families, though, are heavily dependent on fertilizers to nurture the depleted soil. In addition to grass and leaves from the hillsides, wheat bran from their crops, and human manure collected under the commode in the outhouse, they also purchase rice bran or fishmeal on the open market, the latter coming from as far away as Hokkaido. Fertilizer is their greatest expense, costing as much as 70 percent of the total income from the crop according to one village estimate.

Once they have harvested their crop, the village farmers sell it to local merchants, who in turn transport the grain to the city. With the cash income they receive, the villagers pay their rents or taxes, and
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buy rice and other essentials. The money economy is already highly
developed in the Kantō area. Demand from the increasingly commer-
cialized capital has spread cash through the region, and for many years
now the villagers’ taxes have been payable not in rice or equivalent
crops—as is the case in most of Japan—but in *kan*, the copper currency
in use among the local tradesmen. The tax system and the need for
fertilizer, in particular, have prompted the farmers to do whatever they
can to raise extra cash. Villagers sell firewood (sometimes buying the
wood themselves, and hauling it down to Edo for resale) and work as
carriers or packhorse-minders on the region’s highways. Since the mid-
Tokugawa era, they have turned increasingly to silk as an additional
source of cash income.

The farmers of the non-rice-growing uplands around Hashimoto
have been producing silkworms, silk thread, and silk and cotton cloth
since at least the eighteenth century. In recent decades Hachioji, some
six kilometers to the north of Hashimoto, has become a major regional
market for silk and cotton fabrics, with merchants buying the products
from local producers (either at the local markets or by traveling round
the villages) and selling them to Edo tradesmen. Now, Hachioji textiles
are being sold not only in Edo, but also Osaka, Echigo, and other prov-
inces throughout Japan. Although Japan’s main centers for silk produc-
tion are the Shindatsu district of Fukushima prefecture, the Közuke
district of Gunma prefecture, and the mountainous areas of Nagano
prefecture, Hachioji is a well-established player in the national, and
now international, silk market.

The opening of Japan to foreign trade through the commercial
treaties (1858) with the United States and several European nations
has brought a rapid increase in demand for silk. Western markets for
luxury textiles are expanding in concert with the growth in industrial
and trade wealth. In the early 1860s France, traditionally the major
European supplier of silk thread, fell victim to silkworm blight. The
French producers’ misfortune represented a major opportunity for a
new market entrant like Japan. Farmers in Japan’s mountain villages
who struggled for centuries against inhospitable terrain, harsh win-
ters, and oppressive exactions are now responding eagerly to the new
economic opportunity. “Families that formerly cultivated rice and
dry fields are now becoming full-time silk producers,” observed one
commentator in the early 1860s. “The mountain regions are becom-
ing prosperous, and fields and woods are now giving way to mulberry
groves and tea plantations.”

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Given its ready access to Japan’s major foreign port of Yokohama, Hashimoto is well positioned to benefit from foreign trade. The village is situated on the ancient Kōshū Kaidō highway, a route that connects it directly to the Tōkaidō highway just outside Yokohama. The road is one of the major arteries feeding the Edo metropolitan area, and it is a conduit for silk products descending on the foreign enclave from mountainous regions north of the capital—a role that is to earn it the label “Japan’s silk road.” Local merchants have responded to the demands of foreign buyers for greater consistency by introducing an inspection and certification system for locally reeled silk. This in turn has prompted reelers in the area to adopt the zaguri spindle, a relatively sophisticated machine that was developed in Japan near the turn of the nineteenth century, and introduced into the Kantō region only in the past two decades. The zaguri is superior to earlier reeling machines, because its wooden cog mechanism makes it extremely fast and consistent. Zaguri means “sitting and turning.” The operator sits at the large machine and turns a handle attached to a set of wooden cogs, turning a drum on which the silk is reeled. The operator then
picks a half dozen boiled cocoons from a cauldron and fixes the end of each cocoon thread to the drum. The zaguri then unreels the cocoons, twisting the threads together to make a strong strand of raw silk. As one cocoon unravels, the operator can attach another to its end, making extra long thread.6

“Silk is everywhere,” wrote a foreign visitor to Japan’s rural hinterland. “Silk occupies the best rooms of all the houses; silk is the topic of everybody’s talk; the region seems to live by silk. One has to walk warily in many villages lest one should crush the cocoons which are exposed upon mats, and look so temptingly like almond comfits.”7 Families in Hashimoto take in silkworms according to the space they have available and their ability to provide mulberry leaves—either by purchasing or growing them. The silkworm eggs arrive on silkworm “cards” (sanranshi) made of thick Japanese paper. Specialized breeders mount egg-laying worms on squares within one of these cards, which contains the eggs of twenty-five to thirty silkworms. The eggs lie dormant until hatched by the silk rearing family. In their dormant state, they can be transported for long distances—indeed, since the silkworm
bliight in Europe, a significant part of Japan's silk exports have been in
the form of these egg cards.

Hashimoto families buy the silkworm cards from merchants, who
travel from the card-producing districts of Nagano prefecture. There
follows a six-week-long process of painstaking nurturing, involving the
labor of the whole family, but particularly its female members, to rear
the silkworms until they spin cocoons using the silk thread produced in
their bodies. Here is the process as described by an English visitor:

The silk season here begins in early April by the [egg-]cards being hung
up. In about twenty-two days the worms appear. The women watch them
most carefully, placing the cards on paper in basket trays, and brushing
them each morning with a feather for three days, till all the worms are
hatched. The mulberry leaves with which they are fed are minced very
fine and sifted, so as to get rid of leaf fibre, and are then mixed with
millet bran. The worms on being removed from the paper are placed
on clean basket trays over a layer of matting. They pass through four
sleeps, the first occurring ten days after hatching. The interval between
the three remaining sleeps is from six to seven days. For these sleeps the
most careful preparations are made by the attendants. Food is usually
given five times a day, but in hot weather as many as eight times, and as
the worms grow bigger their food grows coarser, till after the fourth sleep
the leaves are given whole. The quantity is measured with great nicety, as
the worms must neither be starved nor gorged. Great cleanliness is neces-
sary, and an equable temperature, or disease arises; and the watching by
day and night is so incessant, that, during the season, the women can do
little else. After the fourth sleep the worms soon cease to feed, and when
they are observed to be looking for a place to reel in, the best are picked
out and placed on a straw contrivance, on which they reel their cocoons
in three days. When the cocoons are intended for silk they are laid out in
the sun on trays for three days, and this kills the chrysalis.\(^9\)

Once the cocoons are ready, most families in Hashimoto reel their
own silk, using the zaguri or simpler homemade implements. Silk thread
is the single most economically important product of Hashimoto (as
in all the surrounding villages), exceeding wheat and other grains in
value.\(^9\) The villagers of Hashimoto sell their silk thread to visiting
merchants, or they take it themselves to the markets of Kamimizo or
Hachiōji. These markets are themselves an important feature of the
cash economy. Established in the seventeenth century, they are held six
times a month. The Kamimizo market caters to the full range of local
agricultural products, as well as farm supplies imported into the region.
Hachiōji, on the other hand, has a specialized silk market, where farm-
ers and merchants sell both spun silk and silk and cotton cloth.

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Some Hashimoto families own wooden looms, on which they weave the silk thread into cloth. For the most part, they weave plain, undyed cloth (gauze, crepe, twill, or chiffon) for kimono makers to work on. In some cases, the cloth is even sent for export. In the neighboring village, Aihara, silk weaving is a major enterprise, substantially exceeding silk thread in annual revenues. Yarimizu, to the north, also has half a dozen cloth-making families, each employing two or three female workers.

In spite of the peaceful and prosperous façade that Hashimoto presents, the world into which Kikutarō is born is by no means a stable or secure one. Indeed, Japan is on the brink of momentous change, and many of the strains that are shaking its political system to the very foundations are already apparent in the smaller universe of Hashimoto’s village community.

For the past decade or more, the political system that brought more than two hundred years of peace to Japan has been reeling from a series of blows, starting in 1853 with Commodore Matthew Perry’s appear-
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ance on Japanese shores at the head of a squadron of steam-powered gunboats, charged with bringing to an end Japan’s long-standing policy of political and economic seclusion. The ensuing exposure to Western markets and technology has been deeply destabilizing, creating ruinous inflation and offering the opportunity for hostile domains with long-standing grudges against the Tokugawa shogunal family to arm themselves with the latest foreign weapons. At the time of Kikutarō’s birth, the shogunal government has been marshaling its forces for a second military expedition against the rebellious Chōshū domain. The expedition will prove the shogunate’s undoing.

But the blows to the shogunal system have not only come from the outside. In part, the system has been the victim of its own success in creating a favorable environment for economic growth and prosperity. As living standards have improved with the introduction of new commodities, and as the taste for luxury has flourished in Japan’s major cities, the samurai have been unable to expand their incomes in tandem. This inability applies at all levels of samurai society, from humble foot soldiers on fixed stipends to the shogunal government itself. Increasingly, the shogunate, domains, and samurai have found themselves in debt to wealthy merchants, moneylenders, and even to peasant entrepreneurs.

At the same time, rural communities like Hashimoto have become increasingly riven by distress and conflict. Earlier population growth, and the more recent accumulation of wealth by successful families like the Aizawa, has created a stark divide between village have-nots. More than two-thirds of the families registered in Hashimoto possess less than one koku of assets—a koku is normally considered the minimum amount of income needed to feed a single adult for a year. Most possess less than half a koku, clearly insufficient to make a living from farming activities alone.10

In the same register, Aizawa Yasujirō is listed with assets of seventy-two koku. His brother, Tashichirō, who was been set up as head of an independent branch household by their father, has twenty-seven koku. Other sources indicate that their combined landholdings are in excess of sixty hectares.11 How did one family become more than a hundred times wealthier than the village average? The Tokugawa landholding system theoretically prohibited the alienation of land, so that unless a family’s members reclaimed new land, it should be impossible for them to increase their landholdings. Yet such increases were the reality of Tokugawa village Japan. While land sales were not recognized, mort-
gages were. A lender could not deprive a delinquent borrower of his land; but he could make the borrower his tenant, owing permanent rent on the land he had once owned. Only in this way could the Aizawa have increased their holdings so substantially while many of the remaining villagers became all but landless. To a great extent, the Aizawa were the beneficiaries of an economy in which taxes and fertilizer must be paid for in cash. Inevitably, the constant need for cash put power and wealth in the hands of those who could supply it in time of need.

Cash is both the savior and the destroyer of the landless village families. Even without land, a family can purchase mulberry leaves, rear silkworms, and reel and sell silk. Its members can labor for cash, on the fields of the wealthier farmers or on the highway as porters. They can live through petty trade—in household necessities like soy sauce or sake, or in local handicrafts such as straw mats. But when the economic winds turn unfavorable, these families are forced to sell their assets, to borrow money however they can, just to survive another year. When the strains become intolerable, they are liable to erupt in rioting and protest.

Such an explosion was brewing at the time of Kikutarō’s birth. The adjustment of Japan’s currency to the international market had caused severe inflation for the last decade. Rice now cost nine times as much as it did a decade earlier.\(^\text{12}\) The increases had been particularly steep in the past year. For those villagers who were dependent on cash earnings to buy their food, the price increases were disastrous. Although silk prices also increased with the general inflation, the increase was only a quarter that of rice and other food grains. Moreover the shogunal government, concerned at the loss of rice and grain fields to mulberry, had recently ordered strict new controls on silk production, bringing further hardship to those without the land resources to grow food crops. Rural protests erupted throughout Japan—141 separate incidents were recorded in the year 1866, a record for the Tokugawa era (1603–1868).

The closest came within a few miles of Hashimoto. Its leaders were from the hardscrabble villages of the mountain districts north of Hachioji. Several thousand villagers descended from the mountains into the prosperous towns on the edge of the plain. They sacked the warehouses of grain merchants in Hannō, then moved on to Tokorozawa, where they attacked grain and silk merchants, sake brewers, and money-
lenders. The rioters focused especially on merchants known to be engaged in foreign trade, since the opening of the ports to trade was held to be the main cause of the peasants’ distress. The protesters worked in groups of a dozen or two up to several thousand, dressed in straw rain-capes tied with colored cords as they went about their business of smashing and burning. Although they destroyed enormous amounts of property, the protesters were strictly enjoined not to harm people. They carried only agricultural implements, and the leaders ordered them “only to chastise the unjust and give the public an object lesson.” Some groups made their way towards Hachiōji, intending to continue marching all the way to Yokohama where they would attack foreigners and “crush the root of the national malaise in order to bring peace of mind to the ordinary people.” If they had been allowed to proceed, their route would have taken them right through Hashimoto.

Before they could reach Hachiōji, though, they were stopped by well-armed village militias. The militias were organized by local landlords—who also comprised the village leadership—seeking to protect their own assets. They were supported by their lords and by the shogunal authorities, who were deeply concerned at the breakdown of law and order in the countryside. For example Kojima Tamemasa, headman of the village of Onoji, created an army of seventy-five village men equipped with spears, swords, and fifteen modern rifles provided by their feudal lord in spite of the strict feudal prohibition of weapons outside the samurai class. The army also obtained a makeshift wooden cannon, and the soldiers were supplied with uniforms, helmets, and other equipment. The village army even had a drum and fife corps to march in front.

BUILDING A NEW NATION

In June of 1866 the nineteen-year-old shogun, Iemochi, died of beriberi while on campaign against the rebellious province of Chōshū, and the huge military undertaking, disastrous from the outset, was ignominiously abandoned. From that point on the shogunate quickly unraveled. The new shogun, Tokugawa Yoshinobu, formally renounced his title in November 1867, but his gesture failed to prevent the rebels from advancing on the capital. By early 1868, a new government comprised mainly of samurai from Satsuma and Chōshū had consolidated its political position as caretaker for an imperial “restoration.” The emperor was moved from Kyoto to Edo, which was renamed Tokyo, and installed in
The former shogun’s palace. Henceforth, all major political initiatives by the government were enacted in the emperor’s name.

The death throes of the shogunate affected villages throughout Japan. Worst-affected were those that lay in the path of the advancing armies. In the Kantō area, government officials and feudal lords called on villagers to support the tottering system, through contributions of money and labor. In the area around Hashimoto, the village of Tana was forced in 1859 to make a special loan of five hundred gold ryō to its feudal lord, the Toriyama domain. Suzuki Kazuma, a hatamoto with landholdings in fifteen villages close to Hashimoto, demanded special impositions in March, July, and December of 1867 totaling six hundred gold ryō. Once the imperial army took control of Edo and the surrounding countryside, the new government, too, demanded exactions of villagers. These were in addition to the economic and social distress caused by the upheavals—rising prices, supply disruptions, and widespread banditry.

The great upheaval of 1867 and 1868 was the starting point for a series of policies affecting the countryside where 80 percent of Japanese still lived. Some of the policies were minor but symbolic—for example the adoption of the Gregorian calendar and the “naming” of the Japanese peasantry. Others, such as the education and conscription systems, were major reforms that would come to affect the lives of a large percentage of villagers.

In June of 1869, the new government announced that all land formerly belonging to hatamoto retainers would now come under its direct control. In September, it created Kanagawa prefecture, composed mostly of former shogunal retainers’ territory, including Hashimoto. Hashimoto was no longer divided between four different lords. The entire village was answerable to the prefectural superintendent in Kanagawa. Two years later, with the abolition of the daimyo domains, governors were appointed to head up each prefecture. Kanagawa’s first governor under the new system was Mutsu Munemitsu, a Chōshū samurai and one of the leading figures in the new government.

In 1871—the same year in which the domains were abolished—the government also announced the abolition of the feudal system and the class system, and the removal of all restrictions on farmers’ movements and activities. The measure also abolished the separate treatment of the “untouchable” groups known as eta or hinin. Until this time, status had been defined at birth into one of four major class groups: samurai, farmer, artisan, or merchant. The system left
many gaps—priests, entertainers, artists, outcastes—and over time the
groups increasingly tended to blur at the edges. Many farmers became
engaged in trade, for example, while merchants were often granted or
assumed the privileges of samurai status. But in principle, if you were
born a farmer, you died a farmer. Moreover, the hierarchical relation-
ship between these groups was also prescribed. Farmers were expected
to show extreme respect for the ruling samurai class. The new system
created a European-style aristocracy, and for a few more years the
samurai retained their legal status. But samurai were now free to take
up professions (including farming, which many did), and farmers and
other classes were relabeled “commoners,” with freedom of movement
and occupation, and without the obligation to kowtow to the samu-
rai. In practice, of course, most farmers stayed on the farm, and they
continued to show considerable respect to the educated members of the
ex-samurai class.

In the same year, 1871, the Japanese government—deeply concerned
about its image in the West—outlawed the wearing of swords, and
ordered its male subjects to cut off their topknots. The topknot had
been an accepted part of self-respecting villagers’ appearance for cen-
turies. Many villages by the mid-nineteenth century had a hairdresser,
who specialized in trimming, combing, oiling, and tying the hair. The
waxy ointment (bintsuke) used to stiffen the taut sides of the hair had
a distinctive scent that was a part of the very fabric of daily life. Many
villagers chose to ignore the new regulations, and there is no indica-
tion that they were strictly enforced in the villages. Isabella Bird, an
English visitor to Japan, wrote as late as 1878 that “most of the men
of the lower classes wear their hair in a very ugly fashion—the front
and top of the head being shaved, the long hair from the back and
sides being drawn up and tied, then waxed, tied again, and cut short
off, the stiff queue being brought forward and laid, pointing forwards,
along the back part of the top of the head.” But it is very likely that
Aizawa Yasujirō, who could not avoid being aware of the rule and who
had an obligation to set an example, was among the first to have his
topknot removed and his hair cut short. A popular ditty reproduced in
the newspapers went: “If you tap a shave-head, you will hear the voice
of indecision. If you tap a long-hair, you will hear the sound of imperial
restoration. If you tap a crop-head, you will hear the sound of civiliza-
tion and enlightenment.” That sound was beginning to be heard even
in the villages of the Kantō region.

At the start of 1873, the government mandated the use of the Gre-
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The Gregorian calendar. The measure caused a good deal of chaos at first, especially as all but two days of December 1872 were “cancelled” (this was for purposes of alignment, although some have suggested it was mainly a measure to avoid paying civil servants a twelfth month’s salary). The sudden shift from a lunar to a solar calendar was undoubtedly a shock for conservative Japanese villagers, many of whom vigorously protested the change. But it would be misleading to suggest that the change radically affected the seasonal pattern in Japanese villages. Rural Japanese had no agency in the old calendar, which was strictly controlled by the shogunal government (even the printing of calendars required a government license). Moreover, the old system was strictly speaking not lunar but lunar-solar, since it was adjusted periodically to stay aligned with the solar year. The new system used the same twelve months as the old (though without the need for intercalary months), and the weekdays in Japan have used the same seven-day sequence of planetary names as in Europe since at least the ninth century. In spite of the adoption of the solar calendar, many village holidays and almanacs remained tied to the lunar cycle—as they do to this day.

At roughly the same time, the government began encouraging—and finally requiring—villagers to adopt family names. During the Tokugawa period, the public use of family names had been a privilege granted to the samurai class, to those serving in public positions, and to those granted the right as a special favor in exchange for money or services. Theoretically at least, this amounted to a very small percentage of the nonsamurai population. In reality, a large number of villagers used family names privately within the village community. Sometimes these were “house names” (yagō), which identified the family by a trade or a location within the village. At other times the name was adopted to show the origin of the family—often, it was the name of the place from which the family had originally immigrated to the village. It is unclear how widespread these private names were, since by law they could not be used on official documents. However, records of donors to temples or shrines show that many had family names under which they registered their gifts (for example, of a total of 2,345 families from thirty-three villages in the Matsumotodaira region of Nagano who had their names inscribed on a votive tablet in 1830, all but sixteen used family names). Family names were also routinely inscribed on gravestones in family burial plots. The prevalence of private family names may well have varied by region, but in the Musashi and Sagami areas surrounding Hashimoto—close to the capital and...
relatively developed commercially and economically—the use of private family names appears to have been widespread. 

Nevertheless, many families were reluctant at first to register their family names officially. One reason for this may have been the fear that registering a name would make family members more readily liable for the new conscription system. Another was that the adoption of official family names might upset the hierarchy within the village, which connected official names to a leading status in the village.

In April 1871 the government passed a law creating a family register system. This system, modeled on an ancient practice of the seventh century (the term koseki, or family register, dates to the Taika reforms of 646), was nevertheless a pragmatic measure aimed at establishing modern bureaucratic control over the Japanese population. Since the basic unit of the koseki was the family, the new measure would be ineffective without the use of family names. In February 1875, the government passed a law requiring all Japanese to adopt family names, and Japanese subjects were required to enroll in the koseki registers in the following months.

Although many villagers undoubtedly recorded names that they had already been using for some time, stories abound of villagers (usually those of lower status or those in remote regions) who had to choose family names to fulfill the new requirement. In many cases, they entrusted the choice of names to their village headman, landlord, priest, or another trusted leader. There were a number of tricky issues involved in choosing names. Villagers could not choose a name that might suggest superiority or otherwise give offense to the elite families of the village. They had to coordinate their choice of names with their close relatives, to prevent a proliferation of names within the same family (this effort was complicated by the difficulty many families had in communicating with sons who had gone to live in the cities or in distant provinces). And their names should preferably have some meaning or relevance.

Village headmen and other name-pickers adopted a number of methods for selecting names for the subordinate families in the village. Some bestowed variations of their own family names. In other cases, headmen picked names related to the occupation of the recipients. The Meiji ethnographer Yanagita Kunio interviewed villagers on the coast of Shikoku Island who told him that the headman had named their parents and grandparents after fishing tools, garden vegetables, and fish: Iwashi (sardine), Hirame (flounder), and Kabu (turnip). In a small eel-fishing hamlet in Kagoshima prefecture, the entire population
adopted the name Unagi (eel). In another recorded case, the priest of the Kōkyōji Temple in Harumiya village near Osaka suggested names for his parishioners based on the direction of their homes from the temple. Those to the north were named Kitano (north field), those to the south Minamino (south field). Another account has a priest giving villagers the names of samurai warriors from the Taikō-ki (biography of Toyotomi Hideyoshi) he had just been reading. In some cases, those in authority had to dampen the enthusiasm of villagers for grandiose or impractical names. There is a story (perhaps apocryphal) of a villager who wanted to adopt the name “Tennōheika” (His Majesty the Emperor). The village head persuaded him to stick with the kanji for “heika,” using the alternative reading Hashigami.

The registration of some seven million families and thirty-three million family members was an enormous undertaking. Although the class system had officially been abolished, the registers nevertheless recorded the family’s social status, with separate entries for the imperial family, the aristocracy, ex-samurai, temple priests, shrine priests, nuns, commoners, and residents of Sakhalin. Commoners were of course by far the largest category, accounting for 93 percent of the total. The registers also contained annotations if the household was of the former eta or hinin (untouchable) castes. The registers were entrusted to the lowest levels of local government—in the case of villages, the village headmen. The names and ages of family members, and the occupation and assets of the family, were also recorded.

The abolition of the feudal system was preliminary to a radical restructuring of land ownership. In theory, in feudal Japan all land belonged to the shogun and his feudal vassals, and the farmer held only cultivating rights. The legal basis for the exchange of land through sale or foreclosure had always been murky, relying for the most part on local custom and tacit consent. The Meiji government, however, put land ownership on a legal footing. Government officials conducted extensive surveys of land throughout Japan, and awarded title deeds to those villagers judged to have the best claim to the land. In most cases, they recognized the rights of landlords and mortgagors, and awarded them full possession of the land.

The new system was fraught with injustice for many. Because of the vagueness of ownership laws under the Tokugawa, even those who rented land often continued until the Meiji reforms to have many of the rights of ownership. Rental arrangements differed greatly from region to region, but in parts of Japan (including Hashimoto) permanent ten-
ancy rights were common—equivalent to a sort of encumbered ownership. The new system, though, ignored such rights, and placed full control of the land in the hands of the landlord. In a survey, Hashimoto acknowledged four traditional types of tenancy: permanent tenancy (over twenty years), tenancy of land mortgaged to a creditor, tenant cultivation of the landlord's fields, and “immigrant tenancy”—land cultivated by those from outside the village. Although these categories continued to exist, each must now be separately negotiated and agreed by contract, while existing arrangements were subject to arbitrary revision.

The new landownership system also threatened the status of land that had been considered communal. Most villages held some communal land for villagers to use for grazing, firewood, and fertilizer. Sometimes this land was commercially viable, in which case it might be an important source of income for the village. In other cases, it might have been uncultivated wild or mountain land that no one had ever troubled to claim—though it was still vital to the villagers as a source of fertilizer and firewood. In the Meiji land reorganization, much of this land was claimed by powerful villagers or the government.

The corollary to the regularization of land ownership was the reform of taxation. Previously, taxes had been imposed by feudal lords, based on a variety of formulas. While there was no standardization, a large percentage of the taxes were payable in kind—mainly in rice, which was a de facto currency in Japan throughout the feudal era. And for the most part, they were imposed not on individual households, but on the entire village community, which was collectively responsible for their payment. The priority of the new government was to establish a uniform national taxation system, giving it a predictable income stream sufficient to meet its obligations. It did so by establishing a new land tax, payable by the individual land-holding family and not by the village, and payable in cash and not in kind. The government established a fixed percentage (initially 3 percent) of the value of newly deeded land, payable annually regardless of land use, crop conditions, weather, or the many other factors that had made the previous system so unpredictable.

For rice farmers, this was in many cases a major transition, and helped push those farmers into the commercial economy. Formerly, their taxes had been paid in kind, and, since rice was also their main item of consumption, they had generally been less involved in the cash economy than commercial farmers like those in Hashimoto. Now, they
must sell rice even if they would have preferred to eat it, to pay the
taxes demanded by the government. For the villagers of Hashimoto,
though, the main question was: would the new tax cost more or less
than the old feudal imposts?

The government’s intention was to make the new tax system revenue-
neutral—it should leave villagers paying no more or less tax than they
had before. On average, the government intended farmers to pay about
40 percent of their farming income in national taxes. In addition,
prefectural and local authorities were allowed to tax villagers up to
a maximum 20 percent of the national tax. The total tax was thus
expected to be about 50 percent of farm income. All these assumptions
were based on 1870 price and land productivity data, as established
through an exhaustive national survey. Over the following years, rice
price and productivity increases tended to decrease the real burden of
the tax.

The taxable land in Hashimoto was valued at a total of ¥30,000.
Based on the 3-percent formula, this resulted in an annual tax payment
of ¥900 for the entire village. It is hard to tell how much of an increase
this represents, since feudal records are very incomplete. But an 1867
document indicates that the village only paid 131 kan combined to its
four different lords. Exchange rates between the old copper coinage
and the new yen currency are very uncertain, but in theory at least the
kan and the yen exchanged at parity. This would suggest a substantial
increase for the villagers. Very likely, the new land surveys revealed
productive land that had been hidden from the Tokugawa authorities.
However, Hashimoto in the Tokugawa era may well have been sub-
ject to “off-the-books” payments to the feudal masters in the form of
forced loans or additional imposts. Probably the most we can say with
confidence is that the villagers did not get off any lighter under the new
system. Unlike rice farmers in other villagers, though, the villagers of
Hashimoto were already accustomed to paying their taxes in cash, so
that aspect of the reform affected them little.

Another major new initiative, quite astounding in its ambition, was
the creation in 1872 of a system of universal education. Japan’s young
leaders were deeply impressed by the educational systems they saw
in operation on their travels to Europe and North America, and they
became convinced that a modern educational system was an essen-
tial part of creating a nation-conscious, patriotic citizenry. Japanese
intellectuals were also deeply impressed by the principle of “self-help” embodied in the Scottish author Samuel Smiles’s bestselling book of that title, which was first translated into Japanese in 1871. In fact, the principles expressed in the book resonated strongly with the ideas of popular Confucianist educators and philosophers like Ninomiya Sontoku, who was to become the “patron saint” of the Japanese school system. A forward-looking educational system would, government leaders hoped, give Japanese children basic tools that they could use to turn themselves—and hence Japan—into success stories.

The government had nothing like the resources needed to finance an entirely new school system, so—following Smiles’s principles—it devolved the responsibility for financing and implementing the new system onto the local communities. Villages were required to raise the sometimes very substantial sums needed to create new schools, preferably in Western-style buildings, and make their services available to all the children of the village, boys and girls alike.

Most villages already had a limited system of education in place: the so-called temple schools. Wherever possible, they used this foundation in the creation of the new government-mandated elementary schools. Often run by the priest of the local temple, or by a teacher affiliated with it, the temple schools educated up to one-third of the boys in village Japan, and occasionally they took in girls, too. To some extent, these schools were a response to the increasing commercialization of Japanese agriculture. As farmers became increasingly involved in trade, they developed a greater need for numeracy and literacy. Starting in the Tenpō period (1830–44), the number of temple schools throughout Japan increased dramatically. The districts of Kosugi and Mizunokuchi, some thirty kilometers from Hashimoto, had thirty temple schools by 1864, serving a total population of thirteen thousand. The schools typically met daily from eight in the morning until dusk, with holidays twice a month on the first and fifteenth (in addition to the New Year and mid-year holidays). The students were tested at the end of each month, with one major test each year. Students studied reading, writing, and arithmetic (with the abacus), using textbooks that were usually handwritten by the teacher. Payment for classes was often made in kind, depending on the agricultural activities and means of the students’ families (though increasingly near the end of the Tokugawa period, payments were made in cash). Students were expected to help pay for maintenance costs including tatami, charcoal, and incense for the school altar, and they were expected to make small gifts to the
teacher at the mid-year and year-end holidays. Francis Hall describes a visit to a village school in 1860: “Each [child] had his little table on which was his copy book and writing materials. The copy book was made of some sheets of Japanese paper sewed together, the writing materials were the reed pens of the country, India ink, and a tablet to grind the ink upon. The desks were black with ink and hacked, not with Yankee prick knives, but with the paper cutting knives of the school boys. Their copy books were smeared with ink into one general blot, for it seemed that as each page was finished the whole was blacked over.”

The early elementary schools for the most part were built on these local school traditions. In the case of Hashimoto, the temple-school teacher at the time of the education laws was Yasuda Beisai. Yasuda was a monk, trained in the Zen tradition at Seisōji Temple in Tokyo while simultaneously studying the Chinese classics. In 1865, he moved to a temple in Tana village, and three years later he transferred to Zuikōji Temple in Hashimoto, where he began teaching temple school students. When the new education laws were passed, the village quickly appointed Yasuda to the position of teacher, and moved him into new premises in a house rented from the Aizawa family.

It is not clear in the early years if the student population was much different from what it would have been under the old temple school system. The entering class on the occasion of the school’s opening in 1873 consisted of twenty-one students: nineteen boys and two girls. The students ranged in age from seven to fourteen. The laws provided that students between six and fourteen were eligible to enter the new elementary schools. It is unclear why no six-year-olds enrolled. Most of the older students had probably already been studying under Yasuda. Among the entering class of seven-year-olds was Aizawa Kikutaro. Kikutaro entered the class alongside his brother, Kenjirō, who was eleven, and his cousin Jungorō, who was eight.

 Apparently the leadership of Hashimoto village made a sincere effort to encourage more students into the school. But in the early years, the school suffered more losses than gains. Eight students quit the school in 1873, and although another three joined in 1874, two of those quit almost immediately. By February 1874, the school was down to only eleven students. Most of these were from the village elite. Of the 106 families in the village assessed in 1873 with assets of less than one koku, only four sent a child to the school.

One obstacle to a wider enrollment was undoubtedly the cost of
elementary school education. The Hashimoto school charged an average of 3.6 sen (one sen equaled ¥0.01) per month. At the time, a farm laborer might earn no more than ¥0.20 per day. If a family had several children, the cost of their schooling could come to one day’s wages per month, in addition to expenses for paper and ink. Another was the perception that education was the prerogative of the wealthy. Children in poorer families were needed to work and contribute to the family’s fragile economy. Even among those children who did attend the school, attendance at classes was amazingly low. According to school records, only one student in the school attended more than 60 percent of classes in 1875, while three students attended less than 20 percent of classes.35

In December 1876 the new Hashimoto elementary school graduated its first class. They had completed four years of elementary education in addition, for the older boys, to an unspecified number of years in the temple school. The would-be graduates traveled to Kamimizo village to take a prefectural exam that reflected the practical and self-help values of the Ministry of Education. The questions in the 1881 exam included:

1. A man owns a piece of land measuring 35 ken by 14 ken. One tsubo of land is valued at ¥0.80. How much is the land worth? [author’s note: a tsubo is one square ken (1.82 meters × 1.82 meters)].
2. ¥143 is distributed among A, B, and C. A gets ¥9 more than B, and C gets ¥7 less than B. How much does each man get?
3. $13 + \frac{44}{22} \times 4 - 11 + \frac{(30-3)}{9} + 12 = \]
4. A cart has wheels of diameter 9 shaku [author’s note: 1 shaku equals 30.3 cm, 6 shaku equals 1 ken]. The cart travels 120 ken down the road. How many times do the wheels turn?
5. What do you call a piece of land that is surrounded on four sides by water?
6. Who was the American leader who defeated the British in the War of Independence?
7. In what circumstances can a branch family be created?36

These questions reflect a relatively high standard of elementary education, after only four years of schooling. Was it really possible in four years to train a student in literacy and numbers, especially given the
demanding nature of the Japanese writing system? Kikutaro was to be a prolific writer throughout his life, and his writing shows an extensive command of the Japanese writing system. Surely, the school system on its own could not have equipped him with these tools. Undoubtedly he received further education at home. The houses of wealthy farmers in the Kantou region were often well provided with books and educated readers. The house of Ishizaka Masataka, a wealthy farmer of Notsu village to the northeast of Hashimoto who would later become a Diet member and prefectural governor, was said to contain one thousand volumes, and in addition to his formal schooling, Ishizaka had private instructors in Chinese poetry, calligraphy, and Japanese poetry. The house of the Kojima family in Ono village contained no fewer than six thousand books of poetry, woodblock prints, fiction, Chinese literature, No plays, and, after the Meiji restoration, treatises on law, the economy, and politics.37

In addition to his formal schooling, Aizawa certainly benefited from his exposure to the many visitors who stopped at his house. The Hashimoto road was always busy with travelers, and those who had a claim to special attention might well stop at the home of one of the village’s leading families. The politician Katayama Sen, who grew up in a wealthy village family, describes this frequent exposure to newcomers:

When I was little, all sorts of people would visit with us, stay overnight, or request some help from us. My father was the shoya [village headman], and as such, it was his job to entertain visitors, or to give help to those who needed it . . . The visitors were from every walk of life. Artists, reciters of poetry, haiku poets, masters of judo or swordsmanship; these people would walk from province to province improving their skills. Among them were quite a number who were to make national reputations or leave their mark on history. If an artist stopped with a wealthy family and brushed some pictures, he could expect to receive a little money so he could continue on his journey. As they rested with us, they would tell us stories about the things they had seen and heard on their travels. I was fascinated, and begged my grandmother always to treat these travelers kindly.38

The creation of elementary schools on Ministry of Education guidelines was a very expensive proposition. For the most part, the schools were financed by subscription, with the village elites contributing the largest share. But middle-class and even poor villagers were also pressed to contribute, and most villages also imposed some sort of special tax to help pay for the schools. Hashimoto’s school in its early years got away quite cheaply. While other villages purchased land and
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built new (often Western-style) buildings, Hashimoto’s school rented an existing house. The total capital contributed by wealthy members of neighboring villages averaged more than ¥1,000. The capital of the Kamimizo school was ¥2,557, yielding an annual interest income of ¥256. Hashimoto, by contrast, had capital of just ¥148—the lowest of any village in the area. Its interest income in 1875 was a mere ¥25. Adding school fees to this, the total annual income of the school was less than ¥40. Meanwhile, the school had expenses of more than ¥70, including ¥54 for the teacher’s salary, and ¥12 for rent. The deficit had to be paid for by a special village tax.  

The other major reform affecting village life was the system of conscription. Throughout the Tokugawa period, military service was both the duty and the prerogative of the samurai class. Commoners were strictly prohibited from owning weapons. Nevertheless, in the waning days of the Tokugawa some of the more forward-looking domains had begun recruiting commoner soldiers and training them according to European methods. Even in the conservative Tokugawa heartland, the authorities allowed and sometimes encouraged peasants to create local militias. After the Meiji restoration, the new leaders studied the military systems of the Western imperial powers as they pondered how to create a unified nation able to resist both internal and external threats. The architect of the conscription law, Yamagata Aritomo, studied the military systems of France and Prussia during their conflict in 1870 and 1871. France had been the original pioneer of the conscript army, introducing conscription after the French Revolution, and both countries relied on huge armies of conscripts. The Meiji leadership came to believe that modern warfare depended more on large armies of disciplined recruits than on the swashbuckling ways of the traditional military caste.  

The basic law initiating the new system was passed on January 10, 1873. The law required all males reaching the age of twenty to submit to a medical examination. Those who passed the physical were entered into a lottery, and those selected by lot would serve three years in the military, followed by three years (extended to nine in 1882) in the reserves. An imperial edict accompanying the new law emphasized that conscription was not in fact a new system in Japan—it had been in force throughout antiquity, and it was only because “idle and arrogant” warriors had imposed their power on the land (a veiled reference to the recently overthrown shogunal system) that it had been allowed
to fall into disuse. Conscription was therefore held up as a symbol of
a lost national unity in which all classes participated in the affairs of
the state.40

In practice, in the early years of conscription a relatively low number
of men—as few as 5 percent on average of those eligible—actually
served in the military. Eldest sons were exempted, as were married
men, household heads, higher-school students, and those with brothers
already serving in the military. For those with the resources, it was also
possible to purchase exemption, though the cost at ¥270 was far too
high for ordinary villagers. Those who would not otherwise be exempt
adopted a variety of measures to change their status, such as arrang-
ing their adoption as eldest sons into other families, or entering new
“branch” households as household head. Such arrangements led the
famous educator Fukuzawa Yukichi to remark on the increase in “sons
who do not know where their fathers live” and in those “who call
themselves the heads of families but have no family members to feed.”
According to one estimate, exemptions exceeded 80 percent of the total
pool throughout the 1870s. Over time, the government tightened the
loopholes, making it illegal for those under twenty to form new branch
families, and exempting eldest sons only if the family head was over
fifty (later increased to sixty) years old. But it took twenty years before
the system was fully functional.41

Still, for villages, the conscription system meant a significant shift
in the rhythm of the community. Just when young men were likely to
be most active in hamlet institutions such as the youth association,
fire brigade, and shrine festival, they were liable to be taken out of
the community and placed in an institution whose orientation was not
local but national. In most cases, they would enter a regiment stationed
in their home prefecture, so they would never be too far away from
their families. But for many, military service was the first time that
they saw modernity in action: the first time that they used running
water and flush toilets, traveled on trains, wore boots or even trousers,
slept in beds, or ate meat. Although the basic diet of the soldiers dif-
fered little from that of humble Japanese urbanites, even this probably
contained more variety and higher quality food than most peasants
had eaten at home. In addition, field provisions included canned food,
bread, and biscuits—all undoubted novelties for village men. From
their (frequently urban) barracks, conscripted soldiers also participated
in urban entertainments, including dining in inexpensive restaurants,
visiting brothels, and theater going.42
The system also placed new burdens on the village administration. Villages were charged with keeping accurate registers of eligible conscripts, and delivering them to the annual medical examination, usually held in June. The examination center was typically in the school buildings of a town or larger village, and village mayors from the surrounding area would lead their eligible recruits for examination. The mayor would be held personally responsible for ensuring a minimum of malingerers or draft evaders. Once recruits were conscripted, the village authorities had to keep a benevolent eye on their families, who were often reduced to dire financial straits by the loss of their precious manpower.

HARDSHIP AND PROTEST

When the American journalist Francis Hall recorded his travels in the Kantō countryside in 1865, he wrote: “Again and again have I stood in their valley hamlets where there were no signs but those of peaceful industry and content, each hamlet to all intents a little republic by itself, knowing little and caring less for the outside world; to whom a change of rulers or revolution in the State would have no significance as great as the death of their own nanooshi or headman—people who know no oppression because they feel none, whose lives have fewer disturbing elements, perhaps, than any other people on whom the sun in its daily revolution falls.” Even after the Meiji restoration and its attendant upheavals, the countryside no doubt looked serene and unchanging as the farmers went about their annual cycle of planting and harvest. And indeed for much of the rural Kantō area, the reforms were implemented with little fuss and no protest. Hashimoto was one of the majority of communities that made the transition smoothly—at least on the surface.

But surface impressions could be misleading. Lying just under the bland façade that villages like Hashimoto presented to the world were burning aspirations and seething discontents. Villagers of the Kantō area, as elsewhere, were by no means ignorant of or indifferent to the changes taking place in the outside world. In the 1850s, village leaders closely followed the negotiations between the shogunate and a succession of foreign intruders. Contemporary copies have been found in remote village storehouses of the foreign treaties of the late 1850s, as well as of seminal foreign ideas such as those in Rousseau’s *Social Contract*. In the mid-1860s, fervently patriotic young villagers like Shibusawa

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Eiichi (later to become one of the founding fathers of Japanese capitalism) resolved to give up their lives for the sake of reform: “Unless my friends and I mounted a rebellion that shook the country and purged the government of its evils,” recalled Shibusawa in his autobiography, “Japan would never regain its power. We were, to be sure, merely peasants, yet so long as we were Japanese we could not stand idly by, saying it was not our duty. We might accomplish little, but at the very least we could gloriously offer up our lives as blood sacrifices and lead the way to rebellion.”

Shibusawa lived just sixty-five kilometers from Hashimoto, in the Kantō village of Chiaraijima. In the 1870s and 1880s, members of village elites were fervent supporters of the People’s Rights Movement, which was agitating for a constitution and an elected parliament. Villagers in the Kantō drafted proposed constitutions, based on extensive study of foreign models, and pressed for the adoption of a constitution even at the risk of imprisonment. As one member of a rural “Learning and Debating Society” wrote in 1880: “Those who grieve for their country and love their people must become the eyes and ears, the body and soul of the nation and dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to the task of establishing a national assembly to consider carefully what will prosper or harm the country in the days to come. They must debate whether or not a constitution will serve the people’s interests. They must guarantee the people’s rights, uphold justice, preserve freedom, and ensure happiness.”

The current of popular feeling in rural Japan was subject to many conflicting influences. As much as some villagers wanted change, others resisted it. Underlying much of the latent frustration in village communities was the smoldering discontent of the landless and tenant farmers who labored under an immense burden of debt and obligation. The insecurity and economic dislocation caused by the collapse of the shogunate, followed by a decade of dramatic reform under the new government, added powder to the explosive mixture of aspiration and discontent, and caused unprecedented outbursts of protest and violence in rural areas throughout Japan.

From the mid-1860s to the turn of the 1870s—a time when nothing was clear except for the impending, and then actual, collapse of the old order—almost 350 peasant protests erupted throughout Japan—about five times the average rate of the preceding three centuries. Moreover, the protests were of greater magnitude and violence than the average. The disturbances of this time were enormously varied in cause and outcome. They ranged from relatively minor complaints about local
abuses of power or wealth, to organized, domain-wide insurgencies, such as the months-long rebellion that took place after the fall of the shogunal domain of Aizu.

In late 1867 and early 1868, peasants and poor townsmen in western Japan broke out into carnivalesque celebrations, said to have been triggered by showers of Buddhist amulets falling from the sky. Crying out a jumble of nonsense verse, often ending in the refrain *eijanaika* (“it’s okay, ain’t it!”) villagers took to dancing their way through the streets in huge, sometimes frenzied crowds, wearing outlandish costumes or even pulling off all their clothes. Some of the verses they sang were explicitly antigovernment or antiforeigner: “The gods will descend to Japan, while rocks fall on the foreigners in their residences. Ain’t it okay, ain’t it okay! Ain’t it okay, ain’t it okay! Ain’t it okay, ain’t it okay! Ain’t it okay, ain’t it okay!” The villagers were calling for a new world, in which they would be emancipated from the care and toil of their daily lives.

While some looked to Buddha and the gods to liberate them, others took matters into their own hands. Unlike earlier peasant protests that had typically seen village communities—often led by their elite members—appeal to the benevolence of feudal lords in response to poor harvests or excessive tax burdens, the targets of these *yonaoshi* (“world-renewal”) protests were often those very village elites: landlords, moneylenders, and village headmen. The characteristic act of protest was the *uchikowashi*, or “smashing,” in which poorer villagers attacked the homes and warehouses of elites, appropriating or destroying food stores, burning homes, and destroying tax and loan records, and property deeds. In the most extreme cases, protesters from many villages joined in regional movements that threatened the very structure of Japanese society. In such cases, villagers at times expressed a clear political vision in response to the upheavals that had undermined or destroyed the authority system they had been reared to think was eternal. In the Aizu uprisings of 1868 and 1869, for example, villagers not only attacked the homes, storehouses, and granaries of wealthy villagers, burning records of land ownership and debts owed by villagers; they also demanded the replacement of all hereditary village officials, the confiscation of land records and other village documents, the appointment of small-scale farmers as village headmen, the return of pawned goods, and the cancellation of interest and/or principal on loans. It was “a revolutionary movement by small proprietors and poor peasants who violently rejected the notion that the traditional political
and economic hierarchy in the village adequately protected their vital interests.”

A second phase of protests, lasting roughly from 1872 until 1878, specifically attacked the modernizing reforms of the Meiji government. The protests targeted virtually every reform made by the Meiji government in its first five years: the adoption of Western hairstyles, the emancipation of the burakumin caste, the demise of the shogun and daimyō, the land tax, the education reforms, conscription, and the introduction of the Western calendar. Some of the protests even attacked rumored measures that were never in reality contemplated by the government—for example, the rumor that the revered Ise Shrine was to be moved to Tokyo.53 Sudō Shigeo recalled in the 1920s his grandfather’s stories of his induction into the military in the first cadre of conscripts under the new law: “In those days it was said that conscripts were selected for the ‘blood tax’ based on their excellent health. After their blood was drawn, it would be used to dye their uniforms and military caps blood-red. Everyone believed that, my grandfather included. However, since he was in such good health, he felt that even if a little blood was taken from him, he wouldn’t be much harmed by it. So he willingly did his service.”54 Others, though, were less willing to play along. In Okayama, villagers went on a rampage in 1873, believing that the conscription law was part of a plot to drain youths of their blood and sell it to foreigners.55

The fantastic nature of many of the rumors, and the apparently reactionary nature of villagers’ demands—that, for example, the repressive feudal system should be restored, the burakumin once again designated as outcastes, the new schools abolished, and the daimyō returned to power—suggest a blind antagonism to anything new, reminiscent of the Luddite Movement sixty years earlier in England. But like the Luddites, the villagers of Japan in the 1870s were not merely blind reactionaries. They were also motivated by real grievances at the economic and labor burdens of the new policies.

Indeed, comprehensive surveys have shown that the majority of protests were fundamentally economic in motivation, even when modernizing reforms were the overt cause.56 The single greatest object of protest was the land tax, which was the greatest economic burden borne by Japan’s peasantry. Resentment against this tax was well justified, for it brought upward of 10 percent of landowning peasants to ruin over the next fifteen years.57

Even the schools, built at village expense and ostensibly for the benefit
of villagers, came under attack. Hundreds of school buildings throughout Japan were destroyed. Destruction of schools was most commonly only a part of more widespread “smashings” of all the institutions that represented the new government and its modernizing reforms. As with the other institutions, the villagers must have seen in the schools a heavy financial burden, thrust on the villages in much the same way as a new tax. Unlike the “temple schools,” the new schools once built were direct representatives of government authority. Their avowed aim was to make good national subjects out of villagers whose loyalties had hitherto been mostly local. Perhaps it is not so surprising that villagers resisted this authoritarian vision of their place in a modern, militarized state. Indeed, their experiences over the next century—indoctrination into a coercive emperor-centered political system, and compulsory military service in increasingly deadly wars—in many ways justified their initial resistance.

The third wave of peasant protest, in the early 1880s, came in the wake of severe economic hardship caused in part by the very reforms that villagers had been protesting in the previous decade. In 1880, shortly after Matsukata Masayoshi took office as finance minister, Japan embarked on a new monetary policy of fiscal austerity and shrinkage of government expenditures. The Ministry of Finance ordered the withdrawal of a series of banknotes, amounting altogether to almost 35 percent of the currency in circulation. Partly as a result of this, and partly due to a global downturn, prices began falling across the board. The price of rice fell particularly steeply, declining by more than 50 percent between 1881 and 1884. Silk, too, declined in price by close to 50 percent. The government also introduced new taxes, on tobacco, soy sauce, and sake—forcing those villagers who had invested in these products to retrench substantially, especially as the depression also reduced consumption. Meanwhile, local taxes increased, as the central government cut back on its expenditures. From 1880 to 1883, prefectoral taxes increased an average of 39 percent and village taxes by an average of 19 percent.

Most sources agree that after the creation of the new landownership system in 1872 and 1873, the amount of land farmed by tenants was about 30 percent of the total. A variety of Japanese studies have fairly conclusively shown an increase in tenancy during the years of the Matsukata deflation, to around 40 percent. By 1912, tenancy had further increased to around 45 percent. The transfer of land spiked sharply in the early 1880s. The crisis led the German economist Paul...
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Mayet, working as an adviser to the Meiji government, to comment: “Ten thousands of country people have . . . been ruined during the past years, and helplessly delivered over to the bloodsucking usurer, and hundreds of thousands will so fall into his hands during the next decades.”

The Hashimoto region did not escape the suffering. In July 1884, the county chief sent a message to villages instructing lenders to report to the police immediately if they were threatened with violence. Three Hashimoto villagers, citing hardship, applied in 1884 for permission to emigrate to Hawaii. In November 1884, five villages around Hashimoto petitioned the county chief for tax relief, citing the collapse in crop prices and their financial distress, as well as the previous year’s drought and the current year’s wind damage.

The administration of Köza county (in which Hashimoto was located) was concerned enough to survey its villages in 1885 on the level of poverty, and the conditions of those living in poverty. Hashimoto reported that “more than half the villagers are poor.” Asked the cause of the poverty, the village responded: “Since around 1877, prices increased rapidly, and from 1879 to 1880, new banks and lending companies appeared one after another, and money became extremely easy to borrow, making the lives of the people very easy. . . . However, from 1882, prices went into a decline, and then last year, the crops suffered wind damage, so now the poor people are barely eking out a livelihood. They are unable to repay their debts or pay their rent on the fields, and so the lenders and landlords are also suffering.” The report added that the price of land had fallen to as low as half the tax valuation. “In this area, in eight or nine cases out of ten the lenders take real estate as their collateral. With the recent severe recession, the borrowers are unable to repay their loans and have had to sell their property. But they only receive from the sale about half of what they borrowed. So they still have no way to repay the loans. Thus, both borrowers and lenders are suffering.”

Villagers in Hashimoto were paying interest of 12 percent on secured loans and 30 percent for pawned items. The village estimated that the typical rent for a one-tan wheat field was ¥1.10 to ¥1.60. Income at current prices was only ¥5.10, and even that income depended on the farmer investing as much as ¥3.60 in fertilizer. The tenant was left with no more than ¥0.40 in cash income for his work.

In spite of all the hardship and misery caused by the Matsukata deflation, the crisis undoubtedly benefited the class of wealthier land-
owners to which the Aizawa belonged. These men were the buyers of last resort for those landowners forced by their debts to sell part or all of their land. And they were also the “usurious bloodsuckers” described by Paul Mayet—moneylenders willing to advance loans to smaller-scale landowners against the security of their land, which in many cases would ultimately fall into the lenders’ hands due to foreclosure. In spite of or because of the economic troubles of the countryside during this decade, the 1880s saw a decisive increase in the wealth and influence of this class. By the end of the decade, journalists were talking of a new golden era for the “country gentleman” (inaka shinshī), similar to that enjoyed by the British squirearchy. This upper echelon of the formerly despised peasants was eclipsing the former samurai class as economic and political leaders of Japan.64

In the mid-1880s, the pent-up feelings of oppression and poverty arising from the Matsukata deflation exploded in violent protest. The silk producing districts of the Kantō region were at the forefront. No fewer than thirty separate protests erupted in the silk villages in 1884—half the number in the whole of Japan.65 The poor farmers and landless laborers were experiencing to the full the double-edged sword of the cash economy. Unable to rely on the land for their living, they had come to rely on silk as their lifeline and their savior. Now, in response to the movement of distant and uncontrollable financial forces, it became their scourge.

The protests of the villagers of the silk region fed into a complicated political situation in the Kantō area. For the past decade, educated members of the village elites had been fervent supporters of the People’s Rights Movement, calling for liberal reform of the political system and the early introduction of a constitution. Now that the constitution had been promised, the People’s Rights leadership had formed a political party, the Liberal Party. Once again, the rural gentry were key supporters of the party, which was already placing its candidates in the prefectural assemblies (regional deliberative bodies with very limited powers, first established in 1878; assemblymen were elected by male voters, twenty-five years and older, and paying ￥5 or more in annual taxes). Among the platforms of both the People’s Rights Movement and the Liberal Party was the alleviation of rural distress. Indeed, in the early 1880s, influential village leaders in the Kantō area joined to create a Poor People’s Party, with the goal of attacking problems of rural poverty. At the same time, though, the village elites who made up the leadership of the Liberal and Poor People’s parties in the Kantō
area derived their privileged position from landownership, in most cases accompanied by money lending. Aoki Shōtarō, one of the leading Liberal Party politicians in the area, was also the president of the Busō bank, the major institutional money lender in the region. The would-be saviors of the village poor were also their creditors. In spite of their best efforts, the contradictions in this position made it very hard for them to mediate the escalating crisis.66

The most extreme of the protests in the silk-producing villages of the Kantō region was the Chichibu uprising of November 1884. Chichibu was a mountainous region, agriculturally marginal and heavily dependent on the silk trade. The villagers were thus hit especially hard by the financial downturn of the 1880s. Their protest had much of the flavor of a revolutionary political movement, and it has attracted both fascination and sympathy from subsequent generations.

The leaders of the uprising were mostly from the middle ranks of the village hierarchy: independent landowners and village tradesmen, many of them members of the Liberal Party. Some, like the movement’s “General,” Tashiro Eiichi, were from wealthy families. They were therefore not so far removed, in terms of social background or ideological orientation, from the landlord base of the People’s Rights Movement. But the path they took was much more extreme than the basically conservative approach of the mainstream rural elite, who hastened to disavow them. Tashiro and his associates formed a plan to seize control of the entire Chichibu district, with the aim of establishing a revolutionary government. They raised a force of upward of ten thousand participants (though it is not clear how many of these were coerced), and they briefly took control of Ōmiya, the administrative capital of the Chichibu district, hanging a banner reading “Revolutionary Headquarters” from the district superintendent’s office. The government had to send a strong armed force to quell the rebels, and it tried and punished more than three hundred of them, with a dozen sentenced to death.67

In the intervening century, the Chichibu rebels have come to be seen as martyrs, willing to die for the cause of freedom and popular rights. At the time, the government did its best to vilify them as gamblers, wastrels, and trouble-makers. What did the rebellion, and the unrest closer to home, look like to young Aizawa Kikutaro? Certainly there is no suggestion of a society in revolt in the pages of the diary that Aizawa began keeping in October 1885.
In February 1885 Aizawa Kikutarō turned nineteen. Already four years an adult in the eyes of the community, he had long been engaged in the grown-up world of farm management, field work, forestry, and property dealing. He went about his work with the energy, enthusiasm, and complacency of his youth. The village around him was not only a beautiful place containing bountiful fields and the friends and relatives he had grown up with; it was also the source of his family’s present and future wealth, and Aizawa was doing his share to increase that wealth.

It was in these circumstances that Aizawa, on October 9, began to keep a diary: “I woke up at five, and went to the stable. I spread out wheat straw to dry, then until noon I cut bamboo in the grove, to use as flooring for the new shed. From one o’clock, I stopped work to honor the Yakushi Buddha and for the Mount Narita Festival. The weather cleared up at the end of the day.”

Who was this young man, penning the first page of what was to become a lifelong project? The guardians of fate had dealt him one extraordinary piece of fortune and one slightly less welcome inheritance. His good fortune was to be born into the Aizawa family—the wealthiest landowners in the village and for several miles around, at a time when land was one of the few guarantors of prosperity. His lesser