



Social Protest and Popular Culture in Eighteenth-Century Japan

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her compact but illuminating concluding chapter, is that even when we know who was reached we cannot be sure exactly what they were reached with: participants in a culture may not seek "to understand everything they see or hear" (p. 401). The potential gap noted by Leo Lee and Nathan between what people actually liked or believed and what members of the elite wanted them to like or believe did not just emerge with the rise of "mass culture" beginning in the late Ch'ing (the subject of Lee's and Nathan's contribution). It appears to have had a long prior history as well.

Although, inevitably, some of the contributions to the book are less useful than others, the volume as a whole must be reckoned an impressive success. It opens up vast stretches of new territory that historians have scarcely touched, and it is fairly bursting with helpful suggestions for the exploration and mapping of this territory. Ph.D. candidates in search of thesis topics will have a field day.

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ANNE WALTHALL. *Social Protest and Popular Culture in Eighteenth-Century Japan*. (Association for Asian Studies Monographs, number 43.) Tucson: University of Arizona Press. 1986. Pp. xviii, 268. \$19.50.

Peasant protest in Tokugawa Japan has recently attracted considerable scholarly attention. Anne Walthall's study is distinctive and significant for two reasons. It centers particularly on popular political culture and how that may be read from, and into, commoner protest. Moreover, she has focused on a single decade, the 1780s, perhaps the most critical ten-year span in the Tokugawa period, during which state authority was shaken badly by corruption and fiscal insolvency but then restored to a modicum of viability through the reform initiatives of Matsudaira Sadanobu. Walthall interprets the frequent protests of the decade to reveal "the commoners' ability to make their own world within the Tokugawa order" whose premises they aggressively challenged (p. 102).

The opening chapters usefully sketch the Tokugawa state system and the modal pattern of collective protest, the *ikki*, which drew on pre-Tokugawa traditions of egalitarian solidarity and which fully exploited and frequently exceeded permissible paths of grievance and remonstrance. The first resort was legal petitioning, and chapters 3 and 4 treat its many forms and formulas. Typically, in confrontations with officials, a conventional language of dearth and desperation framed pleas for protection, whereas, in challenges to commercial barriers and monopolies, petitioning agitated for the reverse, for free and open access to marketing.

Walthall details a number of cases to show how commoners creatively exploited and stretched the stylized syntax and constrained logic of the petitionary format. They made selective uses of the past as precedent, of other regions as referent, and of "common sense" to justify their own, often contradictory, definitions of self-interest.

Chapters 5 and 6 shift to the more direct, occasionally violent actions of the decade. Within rural villages these were often attacks on headmen, whose official conduct and prerogatives were increasingly challenged by commercialization of agrarian social relations. In the towns the decade saw a number of mass attacks on the property of wealthy merchants suspected of price rigging and market control. Walthall here again emphasizes her theme of an autonomous commoners' political culture. By the 1780s the crowds appealed less to Confucian virtues of paternalist benevolence and more for the divine retribution of avenging popular deities.

The final two chapters take up a neglected but pervasive characteristic of Tokugawa protest: the retrospective fashioning of written and oral accounts by which uprisings were remembered and reexperienced. Walthall contrasts "chronicles," assembled from documents and reports by local officials and others concerned about protecting reputations and preventing future disturbances, with "tales," idealized, imaginative constructions of the events as mythic encounters of villains and heroes. She thus posits an apt dichotomy between the historicizing and traditionalizing that followed major disturbances, although, surely, her characterization of chronicles as "realistic and precise" grants an unwarranted facticity to these necessarily partisan accountings (p. 172). The contributions to political culture of the popular "tales of protest" also seem ambivalent at best. They typically personified injustice as the wrongdoing of an alien villain and legitimated popular corrective action as that of righteous heroes of divine proportions. Could such a stylized displacement really have provoked an authentic political consciousness?

Indeed, one wonders to what extent the claim for an autonomous commoners' world, standing against an elite orthodoxy, is useful. Walthall's rich descriptions are most striking for the multiple motives and fluid social composition of protest in the decade. People's distance from elite forms and norms varied greatly, shifted frequently, and seldom cohered as a single, oppositional counterculture. Yet we can begin to debate the meanings and interests that motivated the extraordinary actions of the period only because Walthall has asked questions and tapped archival materials hitherto unexplored by Western scholars.

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