



Recovering Japan's urban past: Yoshida Nobuyuki, Tsukada Takashi, and the cities of the Tokugawa period

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ABSTRACT

This article offers some personal reflections on important recent work that has been done in the field of Japanese urban social history. It focuses particularly on the contributions of Yoshida Nobuyuki and Tsukada Takashi to our understanding of key aspects of urban society during the “early modern” Tokugawa period. It also aims to provide some initial thoughts about the intellectual milieu in which these two scholars' interest in urban history began to develop in the 1970s. Specifically it considers the role of Yamaguchi Keiji in encouraging the study of Tokugawa period cities, in large part as a response to Hani Gorō's provocative suggestion in 1968 that Japan had no significant urban tradition of its own. The article concludes by suggesting that, in contrast to Japan in recent decades, the assumption that cities were of relatively little importance for the development of Japanese society before 1868 has gone largely unchallenged in the English-language historiography on the period. For this reason, scholars working in English have a great deal to learn from the work that Yoshida, Tsukada and their extensive network of colleagues in Japan, have done over the past three decades.

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Urban social history, particularly of the “early modern” period, has been one of the most innovative and influential fields of historical research in Japan over the past several decades. There are, no doubt, multiple reasons for this, including, of course, the rapid expansion of Japan's urban centers in the decades of “High Growth” that followed World War II. In terms of intellectual genealogy, however, an important part of the background to the development of this field of scholarship became clear to me for the first time in Tokyo in 2005 when I was invited to attend one of a series of special seminars organized in honor of Yamaguchi Keiji, Emeritus Professor of History at Nagoya University, by a group of his former students. These seminars have recently culminated in the publication of an impressive five-volume compilation of Professor Yamaguchi's scholarly writings (Yamaguchi, 2009). One of the great benefits of attending the seminar in person, however, was the opportunity it gave me to hear him speak directly about various aspects of his career.

Yamaguchi began that day by reflecting on his experiences as a student at Tokyo Imperial University during the 1930s, when the History Department was dominated

by Hiraizumi Kiyoshi (1895–1984), one of the leading proponents of the Emperor-centric approach to the past (*kōkoku shikan*) that was then allowed to masquerade as serious historical research.¹ Hiraizumi is infamous for having told his students that, “to think that farmers have history is no different from thinking that pigs do!” and, not surprisingly, Yamaguchi explained that he also made a point of terrorizing students such as himself who were known to have leftist sympathies.²

Within this highly politicized and hostile environment, Yamaguchi found support and inspiration from scholars outside the university, including the prominent historian and politician, Hani Gorō (1901–83). As a young man, Hani had studied philosophy at the University of Heidelberg in Germany and after his return to Japan he played a key role in the establishment of the influential Kōza-ha school of Marxist historiography. In spite of police harassment and periods of imprisonment, Hani continued not only to support young leftists, but also to write critiques of militarism well after the onset of the second Sino-Japanese War, a fact

¹ For more on Yamaguchi's experiences during this period, see Yamaguchi (2009, vol. 5, pp. 85–96). For a brief introduction to Hiraizumi's ideas in English, see Brownlee (1997, pp. 169–179).

² On Hiraizumi's infamous equation of peasants and pigs, see Nakamura (1984) and Yoshida (2004, p. 7).

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that would eventually earn him widespread respect and moral authority in post-war public life. In 1947 he was elected to the upper house of the newly reconstituted Japanese Diet, where he would serve for close to a decade, but he also continued to wield considerable influence as a popular writer and historian.

One of Hani's most important books, published in December 1968, at the height of the mass student protests that took hold of universities across the country, was titled *Toshi no ronri*, or "the logic of the city". It argued, in essence, that in order to build a better society, and challenge the conservative political status quo that had once again taken hold of the country in the decades following the War, it was essential for young Japanese to heed the lessons of European history, which made it clear that vibrant urban communities (such as the Free Cities of the Renaissance) were critical for achieving the goal of progressive change.

By this time, Yamaguchi held a position at the Historiographical Institute at Tokyo University, and in 1970, when he was asked to teach the annual "zemi" seminar for students of Japanese history in the Faculty of Letters there, he decided that the theme should be, "The City in Early Modern Japanese Society" (*Bakuhansai shakai ni okeru toshi*)—in large part because he was deeply concerned by Hani's failure to acknowledge the significance of Japan's own urban traditions in his book. According to Hani, in fact, modern Japan had no real indigenous traditions of urban self-governance upon which to draw. There had been some positive developments in the pre-modern era, most notably in 16th century Sakai, which Hani saw as an equivalent of European free cities such as Venice. But all of these positive developments, he insisted, had been "thoroughly stamped out" by the great warlords who created the country's early modern political order (Hani, 1968, pp. 31–32). Could things really have been so simple? Could the great urban centers of the Tokugawa period, which were among the largest cities anywhere in the pre-industrial world, truly have been devoid of positive meaning for contemporary Japan? These were questions, Yamaguchi believed, that were surely deserving of more careful investigation.

In the end, Yamaguchi's decision to focus on Tokugawa period cities was certainly an important one for the subsequent development of Japanese historical studies. Among the students who enrolled in his "zemi" that first year was Yoshida Nobuyuki, whose work over the past three decades has perhaps done more to stimulate the development of the field of urban history in Japan than any other single scholar (Yoshida, 1991, i; Yoshida, 2008, pp. 31–37). Also joining the Yamaguchi "zemi" a few years later was Tsukada Takashi, who has remained one of Yoshida's closest colleagues and collaborators since their initial meeting at Tokyo University in the 1970s. As Professor Tsukada himself notes in his introduction to this special edition, the two men have continued to exchange ideas and stimulate each other's research in extremely productive ways over the years. But their approaches have also remained distinct, and by way of an overview of the development of the field, it may be useful now to briefly outline some rough thoughts about their individual contributions.

Two years after first enrolling in the Yamaguchi "zemi", Yoshida went onto submit a Graduation Thesis about an

institution called the Edo Town Office (*Edo machi kaisho*), which was established in 1791 in the aftermath of the most destructive urban riots of the Tokugawa period. Operated by the wealthy merchant elite of Edo, its main purpose was to provide poor relief and loans for the urban lower classes in order to prevent the re-occurrence of such large-scale unrest. Yoshida's thesis on the Town Office was later published in the *Shigaku zasshi* in 1973, but in the decades since he has continued to devote much of his energy and attention to better understanding the role of merchants, on the one hand, and the urban lower classes, on the other.³ Another important characteristic of Yoshida's work, from the outset, has been his emphasis on the need to understand social relations in terms of how they manifested themselves in concrete, physical spaces (*space = society* is the short-hand he sometimes uses in his own writing). Especially important in this regard have been the *chō* neighborhoods, which formed the lowest level of urban administration in Tokugawa cities, and even beyond them, the individual parcels of land (*machi yashiki*) into which each of the *chō* was divided.⁴

Yoshida's initial interest in the *chō* was sparked in part by Takagi Shōsaku's suggestion, in an influential 1976 lecture, that more work needed to be done to understand the relationship between social organization in the Tokugawa period and the Edo Bakufu's imposition of "official duties" (*yaku*) on different status groups (this is a topic that Yoshida was to tackle directly in an article on the *chō* and *yaku* duties published in 1979) (Takagi, 1976; Yoshida 1991, 293–357).⁵ But his work on the *chō* was also to mesh fortuitously in the early 1980s with important new work on the same subject being done by Asao Naohiro of Kyoto University—and together their work was to generate a great deal of new energy and excitement (Asao, 1981[2004]).

In his analyses of the spatial characteristics of the *chō*, Yoshida has shown that over the 17th century in Edo a fundamental divide began to develop in most neighborhoods between the residents of "street-front properties" (*omote dana*), which could be used for commercial activity because they faced directly onto a major thoroughfare, and those who rented modest dwellings in the increasingly crowded "back-alley tenements" (*ura dana*) (Yoshida, 1992[2000]). This, however, was just the most basic divide to develop within the *chō*. Among the "street-front" residents, Yoshida shows that there were also very important differences, most notably between small-scale merchants who typically owned and operated just a single shop, and the great merchant houses (*ō-dana sō*), which were able to buy up surrounding properties, expand into multiple *chō*, and diversify into various types of business operation, sometimes on a national scale.⁶

As social organizations, the *chō* neighborhoods had originally formed as associations of small-scale merchants, who were all roughly equal in wealth and standing. Over time, however, the original logic of the *chō* was increasingly

³ Yoshida's articles on the Town Office have been republished in Yoshida (1991, pp. 3–178).

⁴ For an easily accessible example of Yoshida's work on the *machi yashiki*, see, for example, chapter 1 of Yoshida (2004, pp. 11–41).

⁵ Yoshida's (1979) article on *yaku* and *chō* was republished in Yoshida (1991, pp. 293–357).

⁶ For a precise definition of the "ō-dana sō", see Yoshida (2000, pp. 20–23).

undermined by the expansion of the large merchant houses. By the late Tokugawa period Yoshida estimates that there were perhaps some 1200 such merchant houses in Edo, and within the commoner districts of the city he argues that they came to function as crucially important centers of “social power” (*shakai-teki kenryoku*), exercising hegemonic control over the communities in which they operated, and forming a distinct layer of authority beyond that of the warrior state. An extreme example of this kind of “social power” is provided by the Mitsui house—forerunner of the modern Mitsui Zaibatsu—which Yoshida has studied in particular detail. By the 1820s and 30s Mitsui had between six and seven hundred employees working in its Edo shops, in addition to several hundred specialist silk workers (*mawata shokunin*). It maintained close business ties with hundreds of smaller merchants in the city, and owned properties that it rented out to well over one thousand tenant households (60% of which were back-alley tenements). It also exercised a great deal of influence over hundreds of other poor households that clustered around its business headquarters and relied on it for work, alms and other kinds of support in order to survive (Yoshida, 1991, pp. 181–228). Clearly, an organization of this scale played an extremely important role in shaping the social order and was able to overwhelm small merchants and workers alike with its power and influence.

If Yoshida’s work thus makes it clear that there were significant divisions within the society of front street merchants, then he has also repeatedly emphasized the need to carefully analyze the structures of lower class society, and never treat the ordinary people of the city simply as an undifferentiated mass. In particular, he has argued that a crucial divide existed between the petty merchants and tradespeople who were able to rent rooms in back-alley tenements and live with their families there, and the large group of people who formed what he calls the city’s “day laborer stratum” (*hiyō-sō*) (*ibid.*). In contrast to the relatively stable population of tenement renters (*tanashū*), the “day laborer stratum” was extremely fluid, and consisted almost entirely of single people, who survived by performing different kinds of unskilled labor on contracts of no more than a year at a time, and often for much shorter periods. On a day to day level, both in terms of work and where they lived, they fell under the authority of various kinds of labor bosses—and Yoshida notes that at the end of the 18th century the warrior state tried to bolster the position of these labor bosses precisely in order to ensure that this transient, and potentially volatile, segment of the urban population was kept under control.

Yoshida’s understanding of these divisions in the ranks of the ordinary people of the city is, again, deeply rooted in his careful examination of the physical realities of their lives, particularly as reflected in the organization of land in the *chō* neighborhoods. It is not the case, however, that his work has focused solely on the so-called commoner districts. In the early 1990s, he began to develop an overarching approach to urban space in Edo, based on what he described as the city’s “segmental structure” (*bunsetsu kōzō*).⁷ At a basic level this can be understood to mean simply that the city was divided up into various different types of social space,

which, for purposes of historical analysis, can also be separated out and examined one by one, as “segments” of the whole. At first, the different spatial segments to which Yoshida points may not seem particularly striking. In broad terms, he emphasizes the divide between those areas of the city allocated to the palace compounds of the warrior lords (*hantei shakai*), to temples and shrines (*jiin shakai*), and finally to the commoner population. What is genuinely exciting about this aspect of Yoshida’s work, however, is the way in which he is able, through careful analysis of internal structures and relationships, to paint a vivid picture of the social dynamics that were typical of each of these distinct kinds of urban space. The warrior and temple districts are, in some ways, relatively easy to understand, organized as they were around a succession of warrior compounds and temple complexes, each of which formed a physically demarcated social world of its own (*toshi-nai-shakai*). The commoner districts, on the other hand, were far more socially complex. The *chō* neighborhoods formed one significant strand in the social fabric, as did the various kinds of guild associations (*nakama*) that linked merchants and tradespeople across the city, as well as the lively world of the ordinary residents of the back-alleys. For an understanding of the structural make-up and organization of society, however, Yoshida argues that the great merchant houses (*Ō-dana*) and large-scale market-places (*ichiba shakai*) of the commoner districts were particularly important. Like the palace compounds of the warrior lords and the city’s temple complexes, Yoshida sees the great merchant houses and markets functioning as the societal equivalent of magnets, with the fields of influence that formed around them playing a central role in shaping the social order. At the same time, in contrast to the warrior compounds and temples complexes, the merchant houses and markets of the commoner districts were not physically closed off from the surrounding society, but open to it, and because they were not focused on luxury consumption, but rather on the active production and distribution of goods and services, Yoshida argues that they were more likely to function as engines of social change, impacting the city as a whole (Yoshida, 2000, p. 29).

While the commercial activities of the city’s merchant elites were vitally important in this way, at the other end of the social scale Yoshida also emphasizes the crucial role of the “day laborer stratum”, whose labor was fundamental to the operations of the warrior compounds, temple complexes and merchant houses alike, and who, in this sense, provided a link between all of the different spaces of the city. Over the course of the 1990s, moreover, Yoshida came to devote a growing amount of his time and attention to studying the social basis for Tokugawa period cultural production. This, in turn, has led him to argue that by the late Tokugawa period, the ordinary people of the back alleys of Edo had come to exercise a kind of “cultural hegemony” (*minshū-teki bunka hengemonii*), giving birth to new forms of cultural expression, such as the *yose* (translated in Kanda’s article in this issue as “variety theaters”), which were increasingly influential throughout Japanese society.⁸

In many ways, Yoshida’s work on the social foundations of late Tokugawa period cultural production, and his focus on various kinds of street performers, artists, and

⁷ See, in particular, the essays republished in Yoshida (2000).

⁸ Yoshida (2003), in particular, see his essay, “Edo no, fukyū”, pp. 110–147.

prostitutes, can also be said to mark a significant point of convergence with that of Tsukada Takashi. As noted above, the two men have been close colleagues and friends since the 1970s, but if Yoshida's work often seems to have grown out of a concern with understanding particular kinds of social space, then one of the enduring characteristics of Tsukada's research has been his strong interest in understanding the nature of different social groups.

Although he has written about a wide variety of subjects, Tsukada is perhaps best known for his path-breaking work on outcaste (*eta*; *kawata*) and beggar (*hinin*) communities, both in the Kantō and Kansai regions.⁹ Under the Tokugawa period "status system" (*mibunsei*), these groups were, of course, considered legally distinct from other sections of the population, and in general, questions of status and law have formed one of the central themes of Tsukada's work. Rather than view Tokugawa period outcastes as one dimensional victims of legally sanctioned discrimination, however, he has consistently sought to explicate the subtleties and complexities of their place within the Tokugawa social order. This has meant, on the one hand, carefully exploring the internal dynamics and power structures of particular groups, while, on the other, paying very close attention to the relationships that were formed between them and other, different groups in society. Tsukada routinely sums up this two-pronged approach by referring to the need to think in terms of "layers and combinations" (*jūsō to fukugō*), i.e. the layers of authority that existed within social groups, and the combinations that were formed when such groups interacted with others that operated with their own distinct rules and logic. A concrete example is provided by Tsukada's work on the beggar fraternities (*kaitō nakama*) of Osaka (Tsukada, 2001, 2007). In it, he shows in fascinating detail how the descendents of the founding members of the communities, who had themselves been genuinely destitute at the outset, gradually came to form a kind of beggar elite, with authority over new waves of paupers who entered the city. Tsukada then goes on to show how, over time, members of the beggar fraternity developed a complex web of relationships, not only with the warrior authorities, who came to rely heavily on them for tasks related to the general policing of the city, but also with individual *chō* neighborhoods, which contracted with members of the fraternity to supply "beggar guards" who could help keep "wild" (i.e. unregulated) beggars and vagrants out of their communities. Overall, then, the picture we get of the beggars of Osaka is one of a group that was distinct from other elements in society, but at the same time thoroughly integrated into the urban social order.

At a more general level, Tsukada's work on groups such as the Osaka beggar fraternities has made it very clear just how much can be learned about the Tokugawa period social order through careful examination of people on the margins of society. This basic insight has inspired a larger effort, led by Tsukada and Yoshida, together with a steadily expanding group of colleagues, to thoroughly debunk the simplistic, but widespread notion that Tokugawa society can be adequately understood in terms of a rigid, four tier hierarchy of "samurai, peasants, merchants and artisans" (*shi-nō-kō-shō*). At the heart of their efforts to promote a

more sophisticated understanding of Tokugawa society has been the idea of "status marginality" (*mibunteki shuen*).¹⁰ At the beginning of the 1990s, when this term was first used it was primarily in order to encourage a deeper awareness of the many different social groups (outcasts, performers, religious practitioners, courtiers, and various city-based occupational groups) that simply did not fit with the *shi-nō-kō-shō* formula. Over the past two decades, however, the approach has continued to develop and mature. In the second half of the 1990s growing emphasis came to be placed on exploring the complexities of even the most familiar of Tokugawa period status groups (warriors, peasants, merchants, etc.) and in the first decade of the new century, research on "status marginality" has come to pay more attention to the way in which people's lives were connected to the production and movement of goods (*mono*), and to the importance of specific places (*ba*) and regions (*chiiki*).¹¹

If this would seem to indicate a connection back to Yoshida's characteristic concern with understanding particular kinds of social space, it is important not to over-emphasize the differences between this aspect of his work and that of Tsukada. As I have suggested above, the two men have maintained distinct research identities and placed emphasis on somewhat different aspects of the past, but they have also collaborated closely and continued to learn from each other's work. It should come as no surprise then that Tsukada too has sought to examine the logic of particular kinds of social space in the Tokugawa period. Inspired in part by Yoshida's studies of the Daimyo compounds in Edo, for example, he has pursued important work on the domainal warehouse compounds (*kura yashiki*) of Osaka, and he has drawn directly on Yoshida's "segmental" approach to the study of urban space to write about the internal structures of the Yoshiwara licensed district in Edo.¹² He has also written extensively about the *chō* neighborhoods of Osaka and, of course, about the physical spaces occupied by Tokugawa period outcast communities, such as Asakusa Shinchō in Edo, and Watanabe-mura in Osaka.¹³ By the same token, Yoshida has also conducted important work on various social groups including, among others, *tobi* construction workers, *kamiyui* hairdressers, and associations of mendicant monks (*gannin bōzu*). He has also routinely acknowledged the value of Tsukada's notion of "layers and combinations" for making sense of the place that these various groups had in the social order.

There are many other aspects of Yoshida and Tsukada's work that I do not have the space to properly introduce here. (Tsukada's work on the role and meaning of law in Tokugawa society is one of the more important.) Overall, however, what I hope is clear from the above discussion, as limited as it may be, is just how much the work of Yoshida and Tsukada has done to deepen our understanding of

¹⁰ The Mibunteki shuen project began in 1990 as a collaboration between Yoshida, Tsukada and Wakita Osamu, another distinguished scholar of Tokugawa period social history. The first publication was edited by these three men under the title *Mibunteki shuen* (Tsukada, Wakita, & Yoshida, 1994).

¹¹ Following the initial one volume publication that appeared in 1994 (see above note 10), a six volume series of edited essays appeared under the title, *Shiirizū Kinsei no mibunteki shuen* (Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 2000). This was followed by a second series of nine volumes, *Mibunteki shuen to kinsei shakai* (Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 2007).

¹² On the *kurayashiki*, see Tsukada (1996, pp. 79–118) and (2006, pp. 184–232). On Yoshiwara see Tsukada (1997, pp. 179–205).

¹³ On Asakusa Shinchō, see Tsukada (1990, pp. 170–171). On Watanabe-mura, see Tsukada (1996, pp. 119–158) and (2006, pp. 283–322).

⁹ For early examples of Tsukada's important work on these communities, see Tsukada (1987, 1992).

Tokugawa society and, in particular, to elucidate the richness and complexity of life in the great cities of the period. As the essays in this special edition make clear, their approach to the study of the past has already helped inspire many younger scholars in Japan, and it is also true that in recent years the names Yoshida and Tsukada have come to appear with growing frequency in the footnotes of English language scholarship on Tokugawa society. Among the English books that have drawn on specific aspects of their work are Gary Leupp's *Servants, Shophands and Laborers in the Cities of Tokugawa Japan* (Leupp, 1992), Herman Ooms' *Tokugawa Village Practice* (Ooms, 1996), Nam-Lin Hur's *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan: Asakusa Sensoji and Edo Society* (Hur, 2000), David L. Howell's, *Geographies of Identity in Nineteenth-Century Japan* (Howell, 2005), and my own *Punishment and Power in the Making of Modern Japan* (Botsman, 2005), which is particularly indebted to Tsukada's work on the history of punishment.

In spite of the growing list of work that has made use of parts of their scholarship, however, my own opinion is that researchers in the English-language world are only very slowly coming to terms with the significance of their methodological insights and overarching vision of Tokugawa society. In part this is because their work tends to be very demanding, both at a conceptual level, and, more fundamentally, in terms of its grounding in close readings of large quantities of Tokugawa period documents, which require specialist training to understand and present an extra challenge for non-native speakers. It is also true that, with only a few notable exceptions, Tokugawa cities have not attracted as much attention in English as they deserve.¹⁴ In part this has to do with the enduring influence of T. C. Smith's work on English-language scholarship in the post-war period. Not only did Smith lay out a case for the specifically "Agrarian Origins of Modern Japan" in his famous 1959 book of that title, he also followed up in 1973 with an influential essay on "Pre-modern economic growth", in which he suggested that, in stark contrast to early modern Europe, Tokugawa towns and cities were largely stagnant or in decline in the latter part of the period. The real source of dynamism and change in late Tokugawa society, he insisted, laid in the countryside—particularly with wealthy rural entrepreneurs, the *gōnō*.¹⁵ In important respects, of course, such a view can be said to overlap with Hani Gorō's suggestion in the late 1960s that modern Japanese society did not have a strong urban tradition on which it could draw. Whereas this view has been systematically discredited in the post-war Japanese literature, however, in English it has gone more or less unchallenged.

Neither Yoshida nor Tsukada, it should be emphasized, is any way oblivious to the importance of agrarian communities in the Edo period. They have, in fact, actively encouraged the study of rural society among their students, often with spectacular results.¹⁶ But they have also insisted

on the need to pay attention to the extensive connections that existed between cities and rural areas, and to think about the two in relation to each other (Yoshida, 2000, pp. 361–385). Most fundamentally of all, of course, their work shows that Tokugawa cities are critically important for our understanding of many different aspects of the historical development of Japanese society over the past five hundred years, including the formation and discipline of the working class, the power and influence of indigenous merchant capital, the nature of the pre-modern "status system", the social basis for the country's performance and creative arts, the role of law in society, and, of course, the enduring problems of poverty, inequality and discrimination. In all of this, moreover, Yoshida and Tsukada have remained true to the very best traditions of democratic, post-war Japanese historiography, always insisting, *contra* the Hiraizumis of the world, that ordinary people are not "pigs" and that, in fact, it is in their lives that the most significant forms of historical change happen. In this age of global, neo-liberal hegemony, this is an understanding and approach to the past that needs to be asserted clearly and disseminated widely. In this regard too, the current edition of *City, Culture and Society* represents an extremely important intervention and I very much hope that it will encourage more scholars in the English-speaking world to take an active interest in the rich history of the pre-modern Japanese city.

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¹⁴ Perhaps the two most important exceptions are McClain (1982) and Gary Leupp (1992). McClain has also been centrally involved in the publication of two important collections of essays: McClain, et al., (1997), and McClain and Osamu (1999). The latter contains one of the only essays by Yoshida to be published in English.

¹⁵ The influence of Smith's work can be seen in varying degrees in many of the most important studies of Tokugawa society to appear in recent decades, including Howell (1995), Wigen (1995), and Pratt (1999).

¹⁶ See, for example, Machida (2004).

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