Tokugawa Japan: Demographics and Family

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Abstract

Two Japanese primary sources, Shuman aratame cho and Ninbechu aratame cho, provide census and familial data for studying the population and family in Tokugawa Japan. As for Shuman aratame cho, it was a product of the strict prohibition of Christianity by the Tokugawa bakufu. In principle, all Japanese individuals were required to get a seal from his/her local Buddhist temple to prove his/her religious identification as a Buddhist not as Christian. The administrative heads of cho (town) and mura (village) were in charge of compiling the document and submitting it to daimyo (feudal lord). The Ninbechu aratame cho, compiled by bakufu officials and local daimyo according to their administrative needs, was a census document of a particular jurisdiction, listing name and age of individual resident like Shuman aratame cho.

The historical demographic studies in Japan based on the above two sources have been used for illuminating the reasons for regionally different family patterns. Still, more case studies are needed for further clarify the regional differences in the family pattern. In addition, in answering many unsolved questions about the demographic realities of Tokugawa Japan, historical demographers can be helped with the findings of other related disciplines such as linguistic, geography, and so on.

Keywords: Shuman aratame cho, Ninbechu aratame cho, family pattern, population changes, historical demography

1. Introduction

Historical sources that offer a glimpse into the demography and family system during the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) of Japan are the Shuman aratame cho and Ninbechu aratame cho. The Shuman aratame cho (hereafter “SAC”) is the byproduct of harsh suppression of Christianity by the Tokugawa bakufu, or the central government. The purpose of compiling SAC was to compel each person residing in Japan to receive a stamp from a local Buddhist temple as evidence of his or her Buddhist faith as opposed to Christianity. Then the administrative head of the cho or mura (town or village) would draft a census register to be submitted to the local feudal lord.

The Ninbechu aratame cho (hereafter “NAC”) is a population survey conducted at the order of the Tokugawa bakufu or local daimyo (feudal...
lord) and is confined to specific regions. It records the name and age of each person.

Although SAC and NAC had different objectives and controlling bodies, they often shared the same target (all residents of a specific area), and therefore were gradually combined. Also, because NAC, except in extraordinary cases, was not produced every year, it was eventually absorbed into SAC. Many sources demonstrate that SAC also assimilates some of the elements of NAC, with its name being changed to Shuman ninbechu aratamecho.

Though Tokugawa Japan internally laid the foundation for a modern era, its basic characteristics itself were by no means modern. The Tokugawa shogunate possessed the highest power, but its orders were not easy to be carried out throughout Japan. For example, in 1638 the bakufu ordered SAC to be compiled across the whole nation, but it seems as if at the time it was followed only in areas under its direct control. In 1671, the Shogunate issued the same order again and this time many daimyos seems to have complied. But there still were some lords who defied the order, as attested to by the failure of historical research in the last few decades to turn up even a single book of SAC or NAC in certain territories.

In general “Daimyos” were largely of two types. One was the Fudai daimyos (“hereditary vassals”) and the other was Tozama (“outside lords”). The Fudai daimyos were the ones who pledged their loyalty to Tokugawa before he won the decisive battle of Sekigahara that took place in September 1600. Tozama daimyos were the ones who acknowledged Tokugawa’s overlordship after the Sekigahara battle. There existed different types of daimyos with differing systems, for example, some of the most powerful tozamas had their own autonomous administrative systems within their specified territories. Nevertheless, the order to update SAC and NAC was widely carried out barring some exceptional cases.

SAC and NAC were created for each town or village, with all the individuals being registered in their family registers. The typical format was to indicate the head of the family, followed by wife, parents, children, and hoko-nin. It would also mark the name of the Buddhist sect as well as the name and location of the temple, being evidenced by the temple seal. As was the case in most rural areas, it would have been simple if there was only one temple in a village, with all the residents being its donors. But in case of urban areas where a resident would also mark the name of the Buddhist sect as well as the name and location of the temple, being evidenced by the temple seal. As was the case in most rural areas, it would have been simple if there was only one temple in a village, with all the residents being its donors. But in case of urban areas where a resident would not use the same temple for all the residents of the city.

Of the many daimyo families did not record the children under 8. In addition, there were many daimyos who did not survey children under 5 and 3.

(2) Census frequency. In principle, SAC was to be conducted in February (“the second moon”) or March (“the third moon”) of every year, but in some territories it was done only every other year or in six years. In case of Kiinokuni Wakayamahan in particular, it was conducted once every 6 years, a fact which, coupled with the aforementioned scope, render the SACs from his territory highly limited in usage. In contrast, in one of the village in central Osaka, all the surviving residents were made to receive the stamp every month, practically conducting surveys every month. But this was an exception, not a norm.

(3) Census categories. Population survey at individual level should be able to show the basic information about a person, i.e. gender and age. Generally the gender was determined by the relationship with the family head or by his or her name, but the age was not consistently marked. In particular, SACs of early 17th century did not mention the age, and neither did the registers of the cities (Edo, Kyoto, Osaka) under direct jurisdiction of the bakufu until 1843. The lack of proper information about individuals proves a big constraint in utilizing these sources. Some daimyos even failed to record the age of peasants in SAC, as it was found among some tozamas in western Japan.
Incidentally, many SACs and all NACs contained the non-demographic data of koku, which was the standard of measurement for rice used to represent the value of the arable land owned by a family. Although it is too speculative to rely heavily on this data (because koku represented land owned by the family only in their physically inhabiting region), it serves as a useful index in understanding the peasant class. In addition to the land, many registers included the size of the livestock as well.

(4) Registry structure. There are largely two ways of making an entry for each resident in SAC and NAC. First may be called the “permanent address basis,” which is based on the family registration system centered on the family patriarch, a system common to Northeast Asia. For this type of SACs, updates were made for births, deaths and legal relocation (following marriage or adoption into another family), but other than these, the information was maintained only in their physically inhabiting region), it serves as a useful index in understanding the peasant class. In addition to the land, many registers included the size of the livestock as well.

Conversely, those who were born right before and died right after the census were captured in the compilation. So, in one sense, SAC and NAC does not provide appropriate data to study infant mortality. But in the exceptional cases like the village in Osaka mentioned earlier, the census was practically conducted every month. In some provinces of northern Japan where the population was in decline, they even kept track of pregnant women to provide child-rearing sup-
port and to indicate the post-natal survival. A comparison between the pregnancy survey and SAC would yield the number of deaths within one year after birth. But generally, SAC and NAC were investigations into the stationary population, not the critical outcomes.

As shown above, SAC and NAC hold some inherent weaknesses as historical demographic data. But it does offer a considerable information which has advantage over the “parish register” in the study of demography. The following lists such advantages in comparison with “the parish register” that provided the cornerstone for historical demography in Europe.

(1) Usefulness of two documents in gaining the data for population at risk. The parish register is a record of events like births (based on baptizing), deaths (based on burials), and wedding. The register was used by Louis Henry who promulgated historical demography through the methodology of family reconstitution. The accomplishments are undoubtedly some of the greatest academic achievements in the 20th century. But as the parish register is a documentation of events, it offers no information on stationary population, age structure, and familial structure. And it has no record of demographic migration either, the number of people whose baptismment, wedding, and burial have been all recorded (ie. those who were born and died in the area of the parish) are in the minority.

Such limitations in data give rise to some problems in demographic analysis, especially an inability to obtain the population at risk that will be the denominator in calculating ratios. For instance, in calculating any birth rate, there has to be a denominator like the total population, population of a certain age group, or population of certain age. One of the most important index on birth rate is the total fertility rate (TFR), but the denominator to obtain the index (ie. the female population of each age group) cannot be derived from the parish register but the total marital fertility rate (TMFR) can be obtained from the register. But if there were many extra-marital births, its relevance as a birth rate index is considerably lessened. Whether the number of births outside of marriage is high or low in a certain era is a moot point that may show differences by period, region, and culture, and cannot be neatly divided between a specific percentage of legal births.

It is often the case that a demographic index is marked in rate (%), requiring information about the total population as the denominator. This is
where SAC and NAC reveal a big advantage by offering such denominator.

(2) Demographic migration. One of the behavior patterns of a population is migration. Before industrialization, migration took place mostly in the form of marriage, adoption, and faraway employment. Information on such migrations are easy to find in SACs or NACs that are based on the current address system, where detail information on such as who went (or came) where and why were often duly recorded. Information on how many from a certain age group of people were born and raised in a certain village went off for employment to which city or village, and how many of them returned, is essential in trying to trace the life course of a single individual. If such information was not available, although the person's birth may be known, it can never be understood that at what age an individual went where for what reasons. Information on the population movement allows not only analysis into a person's life course but also into the geographic range of relocation through marriage or labor, thus yielding the geographic space of an ordinary person's life.

(3) Familial and household structure. SAC or NAC is compiled taking family as the unit. In the case that SAC is drawn up based on each Buddhist sect, sometimes family reconstitution has to be done by combining all the family members scattered in different registers. This can be done in much simpler way using SAC than the parish register, as most SACs contain all the family members in one place regardless of the sect to which each person belongs to, making such reconstitution inessential in the first place. This is to say that SAC or NAC recorded the status of a household as it actually existed. The registers based on current residence in particular to show the structure of a family or a household in its real state. This is a distinction that makes SAC and NAC, despite their shortcoming of not containing infant mortality information, an unparalleled set of historical demographic data in studying family history, provided that sufficient care is given in organizing the data.

Notwithstanding the advantages and disadvantages listed above, the biggest question is from where to obtain the SACs and NACs? When officials of a town or village (estimated to have numbered over 60,000 during the Tokugawa period) conducted a census, they created two copies of the register, one to be submitted to feudal lord or bakufu official and the other to be kept for their own reference. The town officials marked in their book any demographic changes occurring in their respective town or village as a way to prepare for the next census. The copies submitted to the landlord would be the original in terms of data, but it is safe to say that hardly few of them are surviving. Even during the Tokugawa era, some SACs were discarded as old stale papers. From the feudal lord's perspective, it was impossible to detect any religious outlaws (Christians) in SAC, and its best use was found in calculating the population within his province. But from the start of nationwide census by the Tokugawa bakufu in 1721, the increase in the number of population were added between male and female in SAC.

The books available to us today are the ones that were kept in the town or village. During the Tokugawa era, even the government papers like SAC or NAC were stored in the home of local officials, and after the Meiji Restoration (1868) such documents became their private property. It was rare that these officials took a good care of documents from the bygone era. Therefore, the first step in a research using SACs or NACs would be to locate them. Granted, with the recent recognition of the historical importance of data from the Tokugawa era, many archives, libraries, universities, and research centers have started collecting such information. But the real effort is only now setting out.

I started my research in historical demography some 40 years ago in 1964, but there were only about 600 villages or towns where I could collect one year's worth of SACs or NACs, which is only 1% of all towns believed to have existed then. Besides, most were from the 19th century, with only a handful from the 17th. Moreover, regional fluctuations rendered random sampling impossible. The prefectures where a relatively high number of SACs or NACs were available are: Hiroshima-ken, Nagano-ken, Gifu-ken, and Osaka-hu followed by Yamagata-ken, Saitama-ken, and Yamanashi-ken. In Huku-i-ken and Ibaraki-ken in particular, the SAC and NAC were even printed and published. Some of the villages in these prefectures have retained all the records spanning 180 years between the late 17th century and the Meiji Restoration without a major gap (for which no data is found), while some villages preserved all records from approximately the last 100 years of the Tokugawa period, without missing a single year. Many of them are SACs and NACs from urban areas. SACs from cities like Edo, Kyoto, Osaka, and Nara did not indicate the age until 1840s. But not only population data but most of urban data was also lost in calamities like fire and wars.

Some SACs from 1860s inexplicably combine dozens of villages, as opposed to only one town or village as was the previous practice. The record books before 1860s were in a “dot” format, but now they are in “space” format. They were found in 7 villages across the country, evenly distributed in the east and west side of the mainland. Studies are currently underway using these SACs to analyze the family patterns in these regions.

Collection of data has so far relied on microfilm, but some have started...
using digital cameras as well. But no matter what method one follows, the data cannot be used directly from film or memory. The best way is to print them out on paper (in hard copies).

2. Organizing the Data

Let’s say that fortunately there are some SACs that were produced consecutively for a few decades. How should the data be organized to turn it into a useful and effective source for historical demography or research into family history? After some trial and errors, the following method was adopted (in case of writing in hard copies). First, a compilation sheet, to be called Basic Date Sheet (BDS) is prepared. The sheet should accommodate entries for 25 people, each for 25 years. The vertical column should contain each person’s information and the horizontal row each family’s data. As the record was updated every year, in each row should be the information about the family members in a certain year. The top row should contain the name, gender, relationship with the family head, and a unique ID number (it should remain the same wherever it is used) and the column should mark the age. The age system in SAC or NAC is common to Northeast Asia - that is, a person is one year old as soon as he is born, and the same person. To identify whether a person from this year is the same from the previous year.

Information for the succeeding years are entered in the next row of the BDS. If there are no changes, every member will become one year older with the new year. Because the census was often conducted during the non-farming season, the age generally started from 2, not 1. This system of age indication is different from Europe, and is called the cohort-age in demographic terms.

For the succeeding years are entered in the next row of the same person. To identify whether a person from this year is the same from the person in the next year, comparing each other’s name or relationship with the family head would yield near 100% accurate result, provided that the data continued without a gap in year. As mentioned earlier, the SACs or NACs kept at each town or village official contained the changes that occurred before the next census on a separate paper slips or as footnotes or memos written directly onto the books. Paper slips sometimes got unattached and lost, but no such risk existed for footnotes or memos which still remain today to provide valuable information about demographic changes. Of course, such change in information is duly entered into the blank space at the bottom. Birth, death, marriage, and migration as well as name change, change of family head should all be recorded.

In rare cases the recorded age is inaccurate. For example, the age would remain the same for two years or skip one year. In case of the region of Mimonomokuni, for instance, where the SAC was recorded every year for nearly 100 years, there was about 1% rate of error, but it was mostly made in one year. Once the age was entered wrong, it was common that the inaccuracy was carried forward. Evidently, SAC was constituted on the basis of one from the previous year.

The BDS should be carefully and thoroughly researched so that the original data does not have to be referred to again. Every single piece of information about a person or a family (the value of their land, number of livestock, etc.) should be entered, in order to be used as a base for the further studies. Thus produced, the BDS should be copied and used as the source for the Family Reconstitution Form (FRF). Color lines should be drawn on the BDS to identify married couples. Information about births from each couple should be collected. The format of the FRF is similar to that of the parish register.

Next, a family sheet is created. Information such as members of the family, hoko-nin (in-migrants) and dekaezi-nin (out-migrants), arable land and livestock status should be recorded. For the family model, the Hammel-Laslett model is adopted. But as this model is based on the assumption that the nuclear family is more prevalent, it was slightly modified to fit the Japanese society where the stem family is more dominant.

Third, the sheet containing a person’s life history is created. The fact that such individual tracing sheet (ITC) can be compiled to provide the strongest evidence of the outstanding value of consecutive SACs or NACs as data for historical demography and family history. A person’s life from his birth to death should be traced at least up to the point allowed by the record, and all events occurring within that span should be indicated.

So far the summary of BDS compilation has been done manually. But with the development and dissemination of personal computers, this series of work can now be automated in a program. There are two methods. One is to use an existing software, Microsoft Access, to enter the age and behavior of each individual. It is an inexpensive method but it has certain limitations. The other method is to build a separate program to enter the data, though it is costly but once built, data entry will be made much more convenient. The program which we are using is called the Shuma, it shows the family composition on the computer screen. If there are no changes, every member will become one year older.

(Translator’s footnote) A group that shares a statistical element; a group that was born at the same time.

3 (Translator’s footnote) Hoko-nin (in-migrants) are employees who live with the family; dekaezi-bits (out-migration) are members of the family who went away for employment.
at the click of a button for the next year. But if there are any changes, they will obviously be entered. Data is entered from the original documents which have been photographed and printed out, meaning that the BDS is created on computer. In addition, as it is a database of the life history of individuals, it becomes the basis for further analysis. For example, it enables study in high granularity using such statistical methodologies as multi-variate analysis (to analyze changes in rice value, death rates per gender or age group, etc.) or event history analysis. Needless to say, one must first should be familiar with such computer programs and statistical methodologies to make this possible. Currently in Japan, professors Noriko Tsuya of Keio University and Satomi Kurosu of Reitaku University are analyzing SACs and NACs by using this method, and the first book of the final report of the Eurasia Project will be published (in English) sometime in 2004.

The Shuma program was a major innovation compared to time-consuming and costly manual efforts. The only problem was invisibility of the BDS. One could come up with many ideas simply by looking at the BDS. Questions like “Why did the eldest son of this landlord stay single into his 30s?” are in the realm of micro-storia, but one wishes to find out the reason nonetheless. Most historians are interested in individual cases and tracing such individuality, but social science scholars believe individuals to be an issue of distribution, thus paying no attention to exceptions. As such, the result of socio-scientific observation may become a formula. On the other hand, historians prefer stories to formulas.

If demographic history is an area of historical study, historical demography is an area of demography. On this point, the two differ, but without a clear distinction. Most variables used in historical demography require full review from the perspective of historical study. One example could be in belka, or the price of rice. Unlike today, Japan in the Tokugawa period was not a complete national economy. The price of rice, so far as rice is an exceptional goods, did have common trend of national scope. Still, with famine in a certain region, its price would soar only in some specific areas. Most importantly, the price itself depended not only on supply and demand but on the currency value as well, meaning that sometimes the price changed due to speculative causes. If such points were overlooked and this data was dealt as the same as the rice price of today, it might lead to inaccurate results. Thus, historical demography too requires careful critique of historical sources.

3. Research Results

SACs or NACs have been collected, from some regions of Japan based on which the BDS has been created or research using the Shuma program is currently underway. Documents have been found in some other regions and analysis is being undertaken. Some quantity of data is found since the 1860s as described earlier and there is a regional discrepancy in the availability of these sources. There is a relative abundance from the southern part of Ohu region to central Japan and Kinki region, and relative dearth in northern Ohu, or western Japan. But there are some exceptions, the most notable being a coastal village along the East China Sea in western Japan. SACs found in this village proves that this was a society that had a demographic family pattern different from that of other regions in the country.

Results of historical demographic observation using SACs or NACs have been published in a number of thesis papers. A 3-tome report has been published regarding the Ohu region, and single tomes for Shinanono-kuni Shuwa-chiho and Nobi. There are also some unpublished papers, and included among them are some studies into family history.

The conclusion that may be derived from these studies is that Tokugawa Japan exhibited a variety of demographic and family patterns, which was also reflected in the nationwide population census conducted after the Meiji Restoration.

Glossary

| bakufu | dekasegi-nin |
| belka | Fudai |
| cho | hoko-nin |
| chonin | mura |
| daimyo | ozama |