

Contemporary Views on Edo Society

About the project

The Edo period, 1600-1868, is often understood as a static society, in which a rigid system of social control allowed privileged samurai to extort a suffering population of poor peasants. This image derives at least in part from the political rhetoric of the period itself, which extolled the notion of changeless stability and tended to reject any departure from established precedent. Yet, behind the façade of permanence, Edo society underwent rapid and profound change as urbanization changed the economy, putting increasing pressure on the traditional feudal order. From a Confucian point of view, these changes were regarded as disastrous, and especially after the downfall of Tanuma Okitsugu - 1720-88, many called for a return to a purer, less corrupt age.

One of the most outspoken criticisms of late-Edo society can be found in a text with the title *Seji Kenbunroku*, A report on matters in the world, written by an unknown author with the pseudonym of Buyô Inshi in the 1810s. Buyô Inshi takes us on a tour of society, bluntly detailing all that was wrong in the modern age. He takes from the world of the samurai to that of the peasants, of priests, townspeople, prostitutes, and even the pariahs known as “non-people” (*hinin*). In addition, he shares his thoughts on the current abuse of lawsuits, the cultivation of rice and other grains, forestry, the notion that Japan is a divine land, and the fate of people who have died violent deaths. *Seji kenbunroku* gives us a first-hand report on Edo society in all its bewildering complexity. We learn of the ways in which lesser samurai deceive their lords, how village elites grow rich at the expense of their poor fellow-peasants, how merchants secure trade monopolies by buttering up samurai officials, and how pimps exploit girls from the countryside.

Objectives

The first aim of this project is to produce an English translation of this valuable source. The participants, all of whom have published widely aspects of Edo society, will each translate a part of the book, while discussing difficult passages with each other. The translation will preferably be published on-line, perhaps in an on-line database run by the University of California. As work on the translation proceeds, the project will organize workshops and seminars that shed light on various aspects of *Seji kenbunroku*, or on this text’s wider context. In a longer perspective, we plan to move on to other works of social criticism from the same period.