

Property, Power, and Mobility: Household Context and Migration in Early Modern Northeastern Japan

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Introduction

Despite Tokugawa regulations restricting travel and requiring official permission to move between domains, migration was a common feature of everyday life in early modern Japan. Earlier scholarship often portrayed Tokugawa society as geographically immobile, emphasizing the institutional constraints placed on peasants and townspeople. However, research since the late twentieth century has demonstrated that mobility occurred frequently for a wide range of social and economic reasons, including marriage, service, adoption, and labor opportunities. Building on this literature, the present study reexamines migration from a household perspective and highlights how household socioeconomic status and intra-household hierarchy structured mobility.

This study is informed by the Eurasian comparative framework that emphasizes the importance of “property” and “power” in shaping demographic behavior. Property refers to household resources such as landholding and material wealth, while power refers to hierarchical relationships within the household and the authority structure surrounding the household head. In early modern Japan, households were typically organized according to the stem-family system, in which one child—often the eldest son—remained to inherit the household and continue the family line, while other members frequently left the household through marriage, service, or other forms of migration. Within such a system, migration decisions were not simply individual choices but were embedded in the household's economic strategies and hierarchical structure.

The goal of this paper is to examine how household context influenced migration patterns in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century northeastern Japan. Specifically, we analyze how household socioeconomic status, household size, and relationships to the household head shaped the likelihood of migration. We also compare rural villages with a small regional town to explore whether similar mechanisms structured migration across different community settings.

Historical Context and Study Area

The study focuses on communities in northeastern Japan during the Tokugawa period and early Meiji transition (1708–1870). The analysis draws on population registers from one town, Koriyama, and three nearby villages: Shimomoriya, Niita, and Hidenoyama. These communities formed part of a local network that included agricultural villages as well as a growing commercial center.

Shimomoriya was an agricultural village located at the foot of a mountain and was vulnerable to cold summers that affected agricultural production. Niita was a fertile village with rice paddies and mulberry fields, situated along an active road connecting Koriyama with nearby settlements. Hidenoyama was a small agricultural village near Koriyama. In contrast, Koriyama developed as a regional center and was formally designated as a town in 1824. It hosted a variety of commercial activities and services, including shops, inns, and warehouses for tax rice. Because of these functions, the town attracted labor demand and served as an administrative and economic hub for surrounding communities.

These contrasting settings allow us to investigate whether the same household-level mechanisms influenced migration in both rural and semi-urban environments.

Data

The analysis uses longitudinal data derived from annual population registers (*ninbetsu-aratame-cho*), which recorded detailed demographic and household information for local residents. These registers were compiled annually and contain information on individuals' names, ages, household membership, relationship to the household head, landholding status, and vital events.

The data used in this study are drawn from the Xavier database, which integrates these historical population registers into a longitudinal dataset covering more than a century and a half. Importantly, the records also document reasons for migration, including marriage, divorce, remarriage, adoption, service contracts, and absconding. Because migration events were carefully recorded, the dataset contains a very low rate of unexplained disappearance, making it one of the most reliable historical panel datasets for East Asia.

This rich dataset enables examination of migration as part of the life course and analysis of how migration behavior was shaped by household characteristics and economic conditions.

Methods

To examine migration behavior, we use discrete-time event history analysis with person-years as the unit of observation. The primary outcome variable is the probability of out-migration in the following year. In addition to analyzing overall out-migration, we also examine different types of migration by reason, distinguishing between legal migration—such as marriage, adoption, or service—and illegal migration in the form of absconding without official permission.

The models include several key explanatory variables related to household context. Household socioeconomic status is measured primarily through landholding. Household size and the number of non-kin members capture additional aspects of household structure and resources. Relationship to the household head distinguishes between core members (head or spouse), stem kin such as children and grandchildren, spouses of stem kin, other relatives, servants, and unrelated individuals.

We also control for marital status, distinguishing between currently married individuals, those who were previously married (divorced or widowed), and those who had never married. Additional control variables include age, sex, birthplace (native versus migrant into the community), period, and indicators of economic stress such as fluctuations in rice prices and major famine periods.

Findings

The results show that migration occurred throughout the life course for both men and women. However, migration was particularly concentrated between the ages of approximately 16 and 45. Female migration tended to peak earlier than male migration, reflecting the role of marriage-related moves. Male migration peaked slightly later, consistent with service and labor-related mobility.

Household context strongly influenced the likelihood of migration. Individuals living in households with larger landholdings were significantly less likely to migrate. Similarly, individuals in larger

households tended to have lower migration probabilities, suggesting that resource-rich households had greater capacity to retain members.

In contrast, hierarchical relationships within the household strongly shaped mobility. Individuals who were more distantly related to the household head—such as collateral relatives, servants, or unrelated residents—were much more likely to leave the household than core members such as the head, spouse, or direct heirs. Marital status also mattered: individuals who were never married or previously married were more likely to migrate than those currently married.

Importantly, these patterns appear consistently across both the rural villages and the town of Koriyama. Despite differences in economic structure and labor opportunities between villages and the town, the effects of household socioeconomic status and household hierarchy on migration were strikingly similar.

Discussion

The findings highlight the central role of household organization in shaping migration in early modern Japan. Migration decisions were embedded within the stem-family system, which required maintaining household continuity by retaining an heir while allowing or encouraging other members to leave. In this sense, migration functioned as part of a broader household strategy rather than simply an individual response to economic opportunities.

The results also contribute to broader Eurasian debates about demographic behavior by demonstrating how property and power within the household influenced mobility patterns. While migration opportunities differed between rural and urban contexts, the underlying household mechanisms structuring mobility were remarkably consistent.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that migration in early modern northeastern Japan was closely tied to household structure, resources, and hierarchy. Individuals' positions within the household shaped their likelihood of leaving, while wealthier households were better able to retain members. These findings suggest that migration should be understood not only as a response to economic conditions but also as a key component of household strategies within the stem-family system.