House Architecture and Family Form:  
On the Origin of Vernacular Traditions in Early Modern Japan

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The “traditional Japanese house” is often thought of as a light, airy structure, built of wood, with sliding paper walls (fusuma), translucent paper windows (shoji), straw-matted floors (tatami), and an elaborated display alcove (tokonoma). This paper argues that such a building is no more characteristic of peasant life in early modern Japan than is the “traditional Japanese family.” Both are creations which came into existence during the early modern period (1600-1868), but which only reached their fullest realization at the beginning of this century. This paper uses a variety of sources, including maps and housing surveys, to trace the intertwined emergence of these two forms.

Social organization cannot be read directly from house form. In temperate climates, where the constraints of sun or cold are never too severe, people have used a wide variety of building materials — from mud, made of earth; to steel, made of a different kind of earth — to shelter themselves and various congeries of their families, friends, coworkers, acquaintances and strangers from the elements and ensure a moderate temperature. Where housing is durable, it tends to be expensive — in labor, time or money. This means that its dwellers can move in and out far more quickly than the physical structure can change. It also means that interior uses can be altered without necessitating structural changes in the building itself. Thus there is no necessary relationship between any set of materials and the shape of a house and any organization of individuals who may live inside it. The house is bad at capturing the evanescent movements of its dwellers.

Yet, at the same time, vernacular architecture is a material manifestation of culture. People in peasant societies in temperate climates have had a multiplicity of materials and an enormous variety of potential forms to work with. But in each society a particular set of
materials and forms comes to dominate housing materials, so that the individual or family building a house ends up selecting alternatives from a narrow repertoire of choices.

This means that while vernacular architecture is not good for perceiving small-scale, short-term changes, such as who is living in a particular house, it can be very good at capturing broad, long-term changes, over centuries, in the concepts defining a culture. In fact, it may be one of the best sources for tracking such changes. The written documents on which historians most often rely have been created in only a few societies, mostly in recent centuries, and by specific categories of people within those societies. By contrast, everyone lives somewhere; and in the course of living, people create long-enduring artifacts such as houses, entities which are durable in themselves and leave traces even when they are gone. As a consequence, vernacular architecture may provide a view of the cultural changes in the lives of ordinary people not available through any other means.

The above aspect of architecture — its ability to record temporal change in culture — has not been much explored in the case of Japanese vernacular housing of the early modern period. In terms of Japanese house form, broad surveys exist which set rural and urban vernacular architecture in the context of other types and arrange these chronologically.7 Other studies explore regional variation in one aspect of the house, such as roof style.7 And a number of comparative analyses have also been made of rural vernacular housing at one point in time.8 But there is little appreciation of the substantial changes in plan, construction, and ornamentation that vernacular housing experienced in Japan during the early modern period. The consequence is that rural vernacular architecture has been treated, especially by Western scholars, as a timeless, ideal form — a treatment which is historically incorrect, and which denies the intellectual creativity and inventiveness of ordinary Japanese men and women of the past.

This paper uses a variety of materials — maps, local documents, the reports of ethnographers, and examination of remaining houses — to argue that the light, airy building most commonly associated with “traditional Japanese architecture” was not characteristic of the dwellings of ordinary people in early modern Japan. It was a form which came into existence over that period, but its creation, made possible by economic development, was intimately intertwined with changes in household form, and it reached its fullest realization only at the beginning of this century. The objective is to broaden understanding of the history of Japanese architecture by investigating the social and economic conditions under which ordinary people modified the narrow repertoire of forms and materials they used in constructing their dwellings.

Peasant architecture in Japan covers a broad sweep of time, beginning with the disappearance of the pit houses of archaeological populations in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries A.D., and lasting until the third quarter of this century, when service and industry replaced agriculture as the dominant sectors of the Japanese economy. This paper will concentrate on the early modern period, broadly defined. As conventionally defined, this period lasted from 1600 to 1868. It was a period of political consolidation, economic growth, and changes in household composition. It is also the period most usually referenced when the term “traditional” is used.

In Japan several hundred years of civil war came to an end around 1600, as a line of hegemons gained control over the national territory, subdued their enemies, established a system which kept distant potential competitors in check, and vanquished foreign competition by closing national boundaries to all but a trickle of international commerce. This stasis lasted until the middle of the nineteenth century, when foreign incursions resulted in the overthrow of the Tokugawa regime and Japan’s efforts to establish a modern national government modeled on, and peer to, those of the West. The establishment of a bureaucratic state and the expansion of literacy to a larger percentage of the adult male population, who were the principal actors in local public political arenas during this period, also resulted in an abundant corpus of documents which can serve as sources on the lives of ordinary people.

Peace during this period of Japanese history brought economic development. In agriculture, new tools and more intensive cropping methods were invented, and commercial farming developed in crops such as cotton. The establishment of a nationwide transportation system not only allowed products from the country to be carried to the rapidly growing cities, but it allowed people to travel as migrants, as laborers on yearly contracts, and — on pilgrimage — as sightseers. This new mobility brought the heavy hand of national political authority into remote villages, but it also allowed the dissemination of new products and new ideas. This resulted in an increased standard of living, as the variety of food and the quality of clothing increased, and as (to be argued below) houses became warmer and drier. However, growth was uneven, and the second half of the period, especially, was punctuated by episodes of famine and epidemic. At the end of the period, the 1870s brought industrialization and Japan’s entry into the modern world economy.

At the level of the household, the changes during the early modern period were substantial. Households, whose membership had once included large numbers of unrelated persons in bondage or on lifelong labor contracts, gradually lost their dependent families and servants.7 They contracted into stem family households, where one child, conventionally the eldest male, received the bulk of the property and brought his or her bride or groom into the household to live with grandparents and grandchildren, while the other brothers and sisters either married into other households or left for cities.8 Domestic animals also dwindled in number over the period and moved out of the house. The form of household composition was standardized by the Meiji Civil Code of 1898 and remained the model for agrarian households through the 1950s.8 Thus the changes instigated around 1600 had substantial consequences for political, economic, and family life.

For the purpose of examining vernacular housing, this paper will use a broad definition of the early modern period, extending it to the middle of this century. This is justified since substantial changes in plan and use occurred only with the rapid economic
development of the 1960s. Extending the boundaries of the period also allows the analysis to take advantage of sources produced by Western travelers and ethnographers in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth.

As vernacular-architecture examinations of roof shapes in Japan reveal, there was as much regional variation in early modern Japan as there was in the western Europe of the same period. To control this variation, the analysis will concentrate as much as possible on one region, the Suwa area of Shinano Province. This constitutes a small plain surrounding a shallow lake in the mountains of central Japan, located on one of the national roads, approximately midway between Edo (now Tokyo) and the Kyoto-Osaka area. The analysis will pay special attention to Yokouchi, an agricultural village which has been one of the major subjects for historical demographers of Japan.

A wide variety of potential sources on vernacular architecture exist from this area across the period. For example, the village of Yokouchi and the Suwa region are represented by maps of 1664, 1733 and 1910; by surveys of housing in 1733, 1783 and 1787; and by the administrative documents and annual census registers ubiquitous to the bureaucratic society of early modern Japan. Other sources from Shinano Province include a house surviving from 1650, a survey of 1654, and descriptions and drawings by a traveler who went there around 1800. At the national level, scholars have identified a variety of sketches of houses and compounds, beginning around 1500. But two national sources are especially important. One is the series of sumptuary laws emanating from national and local governments throughout the period, which purported to regulate building styles in detail. The other is a compilation of civil customary law carried out in the 1880s in preparation for drafting the first modern Civil Code. Additionally, the turn of the twentieth century produces descriptions by scholars, foreign visitors, and ethnographers. And a number of early modern houses survive in situ or in folk-house museums. There also is an extensive literature on folk housing (minka).

This paper will explore the intertwined histories of housing and households in early modern Japan by tracing changes in the form of the dwelling unit, the boundaries around it, and the differentiation within it. It will examine the kinds of housing that were available across a village population and how the symbolic concept of the household came to be manifested architecturally. The paper will only concentrate on vernacular housing in rural areas. A history of vernacular housing in towns and cities would be equally fascinating, and the movement of people from one location to the other ensures that there was stylistic interchange between them, but that issue will not be examined here.

**ONE HOUSE, ONE FAMILY**

Two of the first questions that can be asked are what the vernacular house of the early modern period looked like, and how it was situated. The equation one farm equals one farm-house equals one farm family is not true of peasant agriculture everywhere, but it does seem to be true for early modern Japan. Thus, the rural vernacular house is portrayed as a single building located on a defined plot of land. A good example is given in a map of Suwa domain drawn early in the period, in 1664. Its author is unknown, but it is said the map was created for an incoming lord who was unfamiliar with the domain. The whole map, on two folding screens, depicts the entire Suwa region — Lake Suwa on the left, the upland and peaks of the Yatsugatake mountain range on the right, and the castle town in left center. Comparison with other documents suggests that it positions hills, rivers, and irrigation channels correctly. The accompanying illustration provides a reproduction of a section of this map showing two villages: Yokouchi in the lower right-hand corner, with its shrine to the left; and part of Uehara, ranged along the road above (FIG. 1).

The map is important because it shows houses clearly. Each house is a single, one-story rectangular structure, approximately two bays by two in dimension. The outside walls are blank, with the exception of one open bay which serves as an entrance, and through which the interior is visible. Each house is crowned by a roof, most commonly of thatch; but a few shingle roofs are also visible. Most of Uehara’s houses are lined up along the road. But Yokouchi’s are in a scattered cluster, facing different directions. Interestingly, while the number of houses in each village is not accurate, comparison with statistical documents from the period shows that the relative size of the villages depicted on the map is correct. For example, only eight or nine houses are shown in Yokouchi, which had 27 listed in an annual census register of 1671. But the neighboring village of Uehara, which was about three times larger, has about 29 houses depicted.

Further evidence about the nature of the village and its houses may be obtained from a series of village maps from the same region, drawn in 1733, which represent houses only by outlines of their gable roofs. The accompanying illustration shows the map from this time for Yokouchi (FIG. 2). And a
painting made two hundred years later, at the time of a battle in the region in 1864, also shows the same kinds of houses. From these various sources it is possible to determine that the fundamental form of the vernacular house in the early modern period was the single unitary building.

Each of these single houses was located on a defined plot of land. Land and tax registers from the period name house plots specifically, and assess them at different rates than land used for other purposes. Twentieth-century drawings, reconstructions of early modern housing, and legal documents from the period suggest that this piece of land included, in addition to the house, a vegetable garden and a bare area for drying grain and performing other tasks. The plot may have contained a few subsidiary buildings as well — a bathhouse, a toilet, and sheds for equipment. What is significant, however, is that it contained no other dwelling units.

This absence of other residences was a change from earlier periods. Medieval settlements often centered on a large household containing unfree dependents in several categories (genin, fudai, etc.). But by the middle of the early modern period such persons had become independent farmers. A source from the same area a few years earlier illustrates the extent of the change. This document, from Saku County in Shinano Province, dates from 1654 and shows several discrete groups of individuals sharing space within the same compound in the medieval manner. Thus, three families and two single persons were housed in three buildings which differed in category (main house, outbuildings), size (1,200, 900, and 700 sq.ft.), and quality of construction (stone foundation, shingle roof for the main house, posthole foundation and thatch for the two outbuildings). Similarly, a plan of a headman’s residence in the Osaka-Kyoto area dating from the early seventeenth century includes buildings not only for the household head’s family, but for branch and servant households as well. Thus the phenomenon of a single house being associated with a single family seems to be a new one in the early modern period.

**SEPARATING INSIDERS FROM OUTSIDERS**

The discreteness of the house can be examined by investigating how the boundaries around it were delineated. The outer edge of the house plot was only the first of a series of enclosures which defined greater and greater degrees of intimacy. The edges of the plot of land on which the house was located were well-defined, not only in tax documents, but also physically and legally. Some were marked along part of their length by a windbreak of trees. (Note that in the 1664 map it...
is not houses but villages which are bounded by trees.) In addition, the boundary of the house plot became more clearly differentiated over the period. Some houses came to be surrounded by walls made of reed and stucco, as evidenced by a central-government regulation of 1764 which prohibited walls and fences around peasant houses. This 1764 regulation also prohibited gates, which were viewed as potent symbols of political power. Seventy years later, in 1844, it was a sign of how houses had changed that the same authorities were further obliged to prohibit the four-legged gate (yotsuashimon), a large and imposing edifice which stood free of its abutting walls.

By the end of the period boundaries were carefully circumscribed. A compilation of civil customary law carried out in the 1880s makes its importance very clear. In preparation for drafting the first modern Civil Code of 1898, the national government carried out a systematic survey of all aspects of civil and criminal law in specific localities throughout the country. The resulting compilation gives exquisite detail about the varieties of local behavior on specific issues.

The section on vicinage in the 1898 code cites three principal issues relating to property boundaries. First, rainwater (or snow) from the roof of one house should not drop onto the property of an adjoining house. Therefore houses must be a certain minimal distance apart, defined precisely in almost every case (generally, 1 shaku, 5 sun—about 1.5 feet). Second, houses, outbuildings, and trees should not shade either a) a neighbor’s fields, or b) the drying ground in front of a neighbor’s house. Here again distances are cited precisely. Shading trees must be cut back. Where a house shades a field, the owner must pay compensation to the farmer. Third, the law stipulated that houses should not overlook each other. Sometimes two-story houses are prohibited; sometimes windows on particular exposures are prohibited; and almost always, the stipulation was that overlooking windows must be screened. Thus by the end of the period maintaining the boundaries between properties had become an important legal issue.

While the edges of a property were marked, the edges of buildings were also marked with clear boundaries and clear differentiation of space from outsiders. For example, sumptuary laws prohibited the houses of rural commoners from having an entryway (genkan). Instead, house yards had to open directly into the interior of the house through a single entrance large enough to accommodate not only people and their agricultural tools, but also the horses or oxen which shared the house with them. It is important to remember that peasant houses in the early modern period bore little resemblance to the light, open, airy buildings which are usually evoked by the phrase “the traditional Japanese house.” Until the end of the early modern period, even small, poor-quality houses were “massive” structures—massive in the sense that two and sometimes three walls had no openings in them, either doors or windows. Thus the house was impermeable, and felt dark, cold and heavy inside.

Peasant houses initially lacked a separate entranceway which would mediate between public and private space. Nonetheless, they had a prominent delimiter between inside and outside in the form of a door sill 8 or 9 inches high. This sill achieved symbolic power by association with a god who would be angered if it were trod upon. Thus, viewing the house from the outside, one observed a property with clearly marked borders; a house with impermeable walls and a tall sill; and an all-encompassing roof, under which one would arrive by crossing two boundaries.

**DIFFERENTIATION INSIDE THE HOUSE**

Not only were houses segregated from their neighbors, as described above, but space within a house was highly differentiated as well. Unlike peasant housing in other parts of the world, this differentiation initially was created less by walls than by changes in floor level. In general, different floor levels created three different spaces—work space, living space, and sleeping space (doma, hiroma, and nema are the common terms; Noguchi gives regional equivalents) (FIG. 3).

In plan, the work space often comprised the largest portion of the house. This was a liminal area, with qualities of both interior and exterior (that is to say, its floor was earthy, like the outside, but it was under the roof, hence inside). This space served as the principal sheltered work area of the house, the place where raw materials were processed into foods and preserved for future use, where farm equipment was stored and sometimes used, and where, if the household owned a horse or an ox, it was stabled. If the house was prosperous enough to have an earthenware oven (kamado), it was located here as well.

The second portion of the house was the living space, raised above the work space by a floor of straw or planks. It contained a sunken central open hearth which provided light, heat, and a cooking fire. Bokushi, a rural intellectual writing around 1800 about his visit to a remote area on the borders of Shinano Province, drew individuals and couples sleeping in straw-mat sleeping bags around this hearth. Except in the coldest regions, the work space and living space were not separated by a partition.

Many houses also contained a third area, the sleeping space, marked by a higher floor level and by walls. Contrary to the impressions of Western and late-twentieth-century observers, this was not merely the living space transformed by the laying down of cotton bedding (futon). Instead, it was a separate room, windowless, airless, and pitch-black inside. The door had a raised sill, and in the interior, in the words of the folklorist Kunio Yanagita, “rice hulls were piled to a height of two or three feet, and well-dried new straw was spread over these to form a pallet.” This room seems to have been dedicated to the procreating couple of the household—the household head and his wife—and was relinquished by them when succession passed to the younger generation. While by the end of the period walls extended from floor to ceiling on all four sides of the room (one side pierced by a sliding door), initially
the partition defining this area was only a mat hung from a beam. (Bokushi noted this in his tour.\textsuperscript{3}) This later developed into a fixed partition in the form of a half wall, and then into full walls.\textsuperscript{36} Thus even the simplest houses were internally differentiated, with changes in floor level and walling defining increasingly private space.

As with the sleeping space, the architectural features of other parts of the house changed during the early modern period in the direction of further differentiation, and through the addition of new boundaries and new levels. Sumptuary laws give a good view of the process. Such laws, which linked level of consumption to class status, initially were rather general, abjuring farmers not to build houses incommensurate with their lowly position. But with the passage of time they became more detailed.\textsuperscript{37} For example, a law dating from Fukushima Prefecture in 1834 lists at least thirteen prohibitions specific to peasant houses — from a notation that they should not be larger than 748 sq.ft., to an admonition that the pillar in the display alcove (\textit{tokonoma}) of the formal living room should not be of wood, but of bamboo (except in remote mountain villages where bamboo was unavailable and hence wood was acceptable).\textsuperscript{38} A prohibition as detailed as this implies that some rural farm houses not only had such a pillar but also the display alcove which it delineated, and the formal space, different from the living space, in which such a display alcove was located.

Kuwahara cites fifteen sets of sumptuary laws from various areas of the country.\textsuperscript{39} Their content and the dates at which they were promulgated are shown in the accompanying chart (Figure 4). This accounting cannot be said to be definitive, but it does illustrate that with the passage of time such laws came to deal with increasingly detailed and expensive aspects of vernacular architecture. For example, the earliest sets of laws deal with such things as the size of the house and the quality of its framing, while the latest regulate details of elite (\textit{shoin}) architecture which had made their way into peasant houses. In addition, the earliest and latest dates cited for each feature shown in Figure 4 suggest the time at which it first appeared in rural vernacular housing and — for the earlier features, at least — the point by which they became so common as to no longer attract regulatory attention.\textsuperscript{40}

The earliest differentiations of space were those described above that divided the living space from the work space, and the sleeping space from the living space. These were followed by further horizontal and vertical differentiation in the form of new treatments of floors and walls.

Three additional horizontal changes in level appeared during the early modern period. One created a new level above the inhabitants by adding a ceiling, providing additional enclosure to a room and further separating it from the natural elements visible in the roof and framing.\textsuperscript{41} Floors also became higher in two ways. First was the addition of the fixed, thick, bordered straw mats now known as \textit{tatami}. These were set in the living space about an inch above the level of wood floor. They created a level intermediary between the living space and the sleeping space, and thereby added a formal space (\textit{kyakuma}) to the plan.\textsuperscript{42} The second change in floor level occurred within that formal space. A portion of its floor — wood, not \textit{tatami} — was raised along one wall to create a display alcove, the \textit{tokonoma}. This was no longer a place for humans, but for the formal display of objects. Hence, through the manipulation of floor levels, new kinds of spaces — and greater differentiation of existing spaces — was created.

During the early modern period the house also became differentiated vertically so that what formerly had been one room, segregated by floor level, came to be divided and closed in by walls of various materials and qualities at various heights. At head height, a frieze rail, or lintel (\textit{nageshiki}), appeared. And the space above it up to the level of the rafters was filled in with various materials, creating a transom which separated one space from another overhead. At floor level, fixed wooden walls or tracks into which opaque paper walls (\textit{fusuma}) or translucent paper windows (\textit{shoji}) could be set were built on the low sills which separated different wood-floor areas from one another.\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Shoji} and \textit{fusuma} walls could be moved or removed; but while present, they enclosed, rather than opened, space. Similar moveable wooden walls (\textit{amado}) were set into tracks running along the exterior walls, creating a verandah (\textit{engawa}). Although this meant opening a hole in the formerly impermeable wall, this did not open the interior directly to the outside. Instead, it created a new boundary and an additional liminal space which further separated the interior of the house from its yard.

This increasing differentiation of space inside and out was accompanied by an increasing differentiation of the residents of the house. As mentioned above, the medieval compound included within or near its walls both the master’s servants and his animals. With greater intensity of cultivation, cows and horses gradually disappeared from farms during the early modern period. More importantly, those farm animals which were left

![Figure 3: Floor plan of three-part vernacular house. (Based on: C. Kawashima, Minka: Traditional Houses of Rural Japan (Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1986), pp. 65-67.)](image-url)
moved out from under the roof of the house. A sumptuary law of 1754 seems to mark the beginning of this process. It prohibited ordinary farmers (but not their higher-status neighbors) from building houses with an L-shaped or T-shaped floor plan. The principal feature of these new floor plans was to separate animal from human habitation. By the middle of the twentieth century farm animals no longer shared a roof with their owners.

The location of people also changed. During the first part of the early modern period the lifelong agricultural servants who had lived in their master's compound became independent landholders, and built separate houses of their own. And agricultural servants on short contracts, who earlier would have slept around the farmer's hearth, acquired their own sleeping space. An undated early modern house plan from the Suwa area attests to this change by designating one room for that purpose. The plan also shows that the retired household head and his wife had moved out of the main house into a separate dwelling. Such a feature was much prized by Beardsley et al.'s twentieth-century informants. Thus the architectural features of the house and its yard show an entity which is strongly defined as a single unit, and whose definition, when it does change, changes in the direction of further sequestration.

**DISTRIBUTION OF HOUSING**

The above discussion indicates that the rural vernacular house was not monolithic across time. It is also possible to consider whether the rural vernacular house was monolithic across space by asking how the size and quality of housing was distributed across a space as small as a village. In this regard, it is first important to mention that some persons in the village might be homeless. Local magistrates had a special office to deal with them, and as the compilation of civil customary law makes clear, their disposition was a continuing problem for villagers. However, this discussion will by necessity concentrate only on those who did have a place to live.

Extant houses, whether collected into house museums or remaining in their original locations do not provide good evidence of the distribution of housing through the rural commoner population. The reason is that those houses which have survived tend to be higher-quality ones constructed by the wealthier members of the population. In addition, recent changes in housing stock mean that, even if such houses have not been moved, their historical context has disappeared. Luckily, the Suwa area provides several documents which indicate the distribution of housing. The best is a housing survey of the village of Fukuzawa dating from 1733. This document, signed on the tenth day of the third month by the village headman and his two deputies and addressed to the local magistrate, lists house size, name of head of household (including among them widows and heirs), and a few details of construction for 53 houses and the local Buddhist temple. House size is measured as length by width in ken; and areas within the house are given in square ken (tsubo) (one ken is about six feet). Construction details include whether the foundation was post-hole or stone (dimensions were not given for the former); the presence of a wooden floor; and whether there were two stories. The accompanying chart diagrams these details by square footage (FIG. 5).
Clearly, the sizes of houses in this village varied considerably. Excluding those with posthole foundations, the houses ranged from about 200 to about 1,400 square feet. Three-quarters of them were 800 square feet or less. (For comparison, the tract houses built in Levittown in the early 1950s were about 700 square feet.) The most common was a house of dimensions about 18×36 feet. Several other documents from the same area confirm these figures. For example, an inventory of nineteen houses originating from a village in a newly reclaimed area in 1787 gives floor area ranging from about 200 to about 1,100 square feet. And a famine-relief document from the same village four years earlier shows that the six households afflicted had houses in the same range.50

Houses varied in quality of construction as well as in size. The most fundamental difference was in the kind of foundation. In better-quality houses, the wooden uprights rested on stones. In poorer ones, they were stuck directly into the ground, like postholes. Such houses, being less durable, were likely to have been smaller than those for which dimensions were given. For example, the 1784 famine document noted above lists a size of about 150 sq.ft. for the one dwelling described as “posthole foundation” (by the time of the 1787 document the house had been enlarged to about 200 sq.ft.). These figures are in accord with Taut’s observations of poor dwellings in the 1930s.51

A second structural variation was the presence of a wooden floor. Such a floor was made of wood planking placed on beams and raised about a foot above ground level. This floor did not cover the whole interior of the house, but only a space comprising about half of it, i.e., the living and sleeping areas. The rest was a work space of pounded earth at ground level. None of the posthole houses had wooden floors, but all of the largest houses did, and about half of the houses in the middle range of 500-800 sq.ft. did as well. Finally, one house, the largest one, had two stories, its wooden-floorled upstairs adding 350 sq.ft. to its size.

Putting this information together, it is possible to see that there were three broad categories of housing in this village. About a quarter of the houses were small, cold, damp and impermanent, built with posthole foundations. There was a broad middle category of the more durable stone-foundation houses, ranging in size from 200 to 900 sq.ft. Some of these had wood floors which protected their occupants from insects and vermin and made the living and sleeping spaces warmer and drier. Finally, there was a handful of large houses, about 10 percent of the total, all of which had durable stone foundations and wooden floors, and one of which was two stories high.

The survey also provides a smidgen of information about the identity of those who lived in these houses. It does not reveal the occupant of the largest house, but it does indicate that the headman lived in one of the largest ones, a house of 1,200 sq.ft., and that his two deputies lived in middle-sized houses of 800 and 535 sq.ft.. The three houses of these local officials were of the best quality, with stone foundations and wooden floors. Thus in this one village at this one point in time the housing stock was by no means monolithic, but indicated considerable stratification in quality. In addition, from the survey it is possible to deduce that the differentiation in floor level and floor quality emblematic of the development of vernacular housing over this period, not to mention walls or verandahs, was not widespread at this early date. Some 70 percent of the houses in the village had dirt, rather than wood, floors, and hence were probably still cold, dark, massive and damp.

SYMBOLIZING THE HOUSEHOLD: THE ANCESTRAL ALTAR

So far the discussion has indicated that during the early modern period rural vernacular houses were of various sizes and constructions, that they improved in quality and detailing, and that they acquired a finer differentiation of interior space through the addition of floors, ceilings and walls. However, houses are symbolic as well as physical structures, and as their physical appearance changed, there is some evidence that their symbolic aspect underwent profound change as well.

The ancestors of a household in Japan today inhabit a particular piece of furniture, the ancestral altar (butsudan), which is located in an alcove adjoining the main living space of the house.53 The ancestor enters this altar when the memorial tablet (haz), which was prepared at his or her death, is moved into it at the end of the mourning period; and he or she receives daily offerings, reports, and requests for assistance there. Thus the ancestral altar may be thought of as the physical symbol of the continuing existence of the household over generations. Mid-twentieth-century ethnographers reported that the altar was so important that in case of fire it was the first object that residents would attempt to save.54

As mentioned above, during the first third of the early modern period developments in agricultural technology enabled those who formerly would have been indentured servants of various sorts to move out of their masters’ com-
Household altars are an important indicator of ancestor worship because only commoner and merchant houses contained them. National and local lords also worshipped their ancestors using memorial tablets, but they lodged the tablets in family temples. Vernacular architecture gives evidence of ancestral altars by the presence of the alcoves in which they were located, by distinctive shelving, and by the appearance on house plans of a swastika marking their location.

At the beginning of the early modern period it is unlikely that rural commoners had altars in their houses. The ancient vernacular houses of the fifteenth and sixteenth century which survive in the core areas of central Japan — durable houses constructed by wealthy people — show no evidence of such features. But altars do begin to appear after 1600, initially in the houses of the richest segment of the rural commoner population. For example, the house of a village headman built in Shinano Province around 1650 includes a freestanding ancestral altar about six feet high which was broadly contemporaneous with the original construction. Only some of the houses dating from that century in this part of Japan have such altars, but by the end of the early modern period evidence of their presence appears on most house plans and in most surviving dwellings.

Other evidence — concerning the erection of gravestones, the activities of priests, and the development of the altar-construction industry — suggests that mortuary activities of this kind by ordinary people grew enormously during this period. Thus, it is likely that before 1600 rural commoners, if they worshipped ancestors at all, worshipped the ancestors of the households of which they were dependents. They came to have their own ancestors, and began to think of their families as enduring entities which transcended the lives of their individual members, only during the early modern period. This new consciousness was both created by and reflected in the dwellings which ordinary people built for themselves.

Creating the "Traditional" House and the "Traditional" Family

This paper has been framed around the argument that both the "traditional" house and the "traditional" family, as conceived today, are outcomes of a process of change, not static features of a uniform past. Only over time did the massive, dark, impenetrable peasant house of 1600 become the light, airy structure we identify as the "traditional" Japanese house today. The same process changed the heterogeneous group of servants, employees and relatives that formerly constituted the household unit into what we now think of as the "traditional" Japanese family. Both emerged as the result of a process. And neither cohered into what we think of as "tradition" until the end of the nineteenth century.

The most obvious and most expected of these changes was the incorporation of elements of "high" culture into domestic architecture and domestic social organization. Thus, peasant houses acquired translucent walls (shoji) and tokonoma alcoves, and peasant families acquired their own ancestors. Both of these possibilities arose only as economic development and new transportation systems intertwined the lives of rural and urban dwellers. But there were two other, less predictable, changes.

This paper argues that in architecture the principal change to the house was a greater differentiation of its parts: stronger boundaries, new kinds of spaces created by new kinds of floors and ceilings, and the creation of more liminal spaces as the boundary between inside and outside became more elaborated. Thus was the small, cold, dark, massive house in which ordinary people lived at the beginning of the period transformed into the light, airy structure with sliding paper walls (fusuma), translucent paper windows (shoji), straw-matted floors (tatami), and an elaborated display alcove (tokonoma), which Westerners have recently described as the archetypal "traditional Japanese house." What we see as simplicity is in fact a complex elaboration of a much simpler earlier form.

At the same time, as vernacular Japanese houses were becoming more elaborated, rural Japanese households were becoming simpler. Ordinary persons, who at the beginning of the period might have lived as lifelong dependent families in the compounds of their masters, came to live in much simpler units in houses of their own. And animals, dependent families, and collateral relatives disappeared from residences as the household was pared down to the stem family: two couples, grandparent and parent, and the younger couple's young children.

Furthermore, as the house was gaining stricter boundaries and greater internal differentiation, and as the household was becoming simpler, the ideology of its residents was being symbolically coded in the architecture through the appearance of the ancestral altar. This piece of furniture, containing the memorial tablets (shina) which symbolized the continuity of the household over generations, did not exist in even the most elaborate houses at the beginning of the early modern period, but it appeared in even the poorest houses by its end. Significantly, the 1898 Civil Code, that classic embodiment of the "traditional" family, devoted a special section to the treatment of these memorial objects. Yet these changes were not uniform. As the examination of the housing stock of one village has here revealed, social stratification was strong, and at any one point in time a multiplicity of houses with a multiplicity of elaborations might have existed in any locale.

Thus, when we examine the history of rural vernacular architecture in Japan, we find that the "traditional Japanese house," like its counterpart, the "traditional Japanese family," was not an essential, unchanging entity, but one which came into existence over a long period of time through the efforts of ordinary men and women working with the set of materials and forms at hand.
REFERENCE NOTES

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5. The phrase "early modern" is used rather than Tokugawa period (referring to the ruling family) or Edo period (referring to the capital city) both for the convenience of readers not familiar with the periodization of Japanese history and to draw potential parallels with similar developments in other societies, especially those of Western Europe, which may have undergone similar changes in dwelling form while experiencing similar processes of state formation and commercial growth.


9. Note that, as in many other places, the indigenous term for this fundamental social unit, ie, referred both to the inhabitants and to the dwelling.


11. See G.L. Bernstein, Harunoko World: A Japanese Farm Woman and Her Community (Stanford: University Press, 1983) for a marvelous account of the change in one kitchen over this period of time.


21. Roof form is the principal feature used by architectural historians to define regional style (Kawashima, Min'ka).

22. See the frontispiece in sss.

23. Embree, Suwa Mura, p.91, and Beardsley, Village Japan, p.78, provide sketches of farmhouses on house plots in the mid-twentieth century. They note that in the early modern period ordinary rural houses would not have included a storehouse (kurin).


home, — no doors or windows such as he had been familiar with; no attic or cellar; no chimneys; and within no fire-place, and of course no customary mantle; no permanently enclosed rooms; and as for furniture, no beds or tables, chairs or similar articles — at least, so it appears at first sight” (Morse, *Japanese Houses*, p.6).


33. The importance of this liminal space to Japanese definitions of privacy is indicated by its presence in new construction of even modest dwellings such as apartments. It is no longer used as a work space, but does include an outside floor under a roof. See E. Ohnuki-Tierney, *Illness and Culture in Contemporary Japan* (Cambridge: University Press, 1984) for further discussion.


37. Kawashima, *Minka*, pp.68,120; and Kuwahara, *Jukyo no rekishi*, p.193. The invisibility of the sleeping space is something of a mystery. It is clearly visible, and marked on plan, in most extant houses in folkhouse museums, and continued to be built in rural houses of traditional construction as late as the 1970s. One factor contributing to its invisibility is that other members of the household, and visitors billeted there, would have slept elsewhere, on bedding spread throughout the living area. Yanagita’s comment cited above also hints that in the early twentieth century this room may have been abolished by public-health workers who substituted cleaned and sun-dried *futon* on tatami for the vermin-infested straw.


40. Ibid., p.59-61.

41. This is illustrated by a law of 1805 which reads, “Previously farmers were limited to post-hole foundations, but since many stone foundation houses have been built they now will be permitted” (Kuwahara, *Jukyo no rekishi*, p.159).

42. Here again the 1714 edict is illuminating. It prohibits ceilings (made of boards) except in silk-worm-rearing households, where they are allowed because they create the floor for a second-story work space.

43. In Figure 4 this kind of straw matting first appears in 1805; earlier prohibitions are against thin, portable mats of various kinds.


46. Beardsley et al., *Village Japan*.

47. SKS, p.791.


49. SKS, pp.786-87.

50. Given the vagaries of the measuring instruments used in vernacular architecture and significant problems in other kinds of measures in early modern Japan (P.C. Brown, “The Mismeasure of Land: Land Surveying in the Tokugawa Period,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 42 [1987], pp.215-55), it is best to think of these measures as approximate. They have been converted into square footage using 1 ken = 3.97 ft., and 1 tsubo = 3.35 sq.ft.

51. Readers familiar with the vernacular housing which appears in Japanese folklife museums should be aware of how much smaller these figures are than the houses which appear there. For example, of the houses representing this region in the Minka-en in the city of Kawasaki, the smallest, dating from Yamanashi Prefecture in the late seventeenth century, at 1,280 sq.ft., would have been among the five largest in this village; while the largest, at 2,400 sq.ft., would have been gigantic.

52. Tast, *Houses and People*, p.52.


58. Although this discussion concentrates on ancestor worship, a similar argument could be constructed about the various autochthonous deities who inhabited and protected various parts of the house. For example, the “main pillar” (*daikoku bashira*) which has received attention from folklorists as the symbolic central support of the house came into existence only during this period (Kuwahara, *Jukyo no rekishi*). Whether its size resulted from conscious or unconscious symbolic elaboration, or from increases in the price of timber which impinged on the ability to acquire other framing of similar dimension, remains open to discussion.