CHAPTER 1

THE TEMPŌ CRISIS

On the sixteenth day of the twelfth month of the year 1830, Japan entered a new era. By coincidence, that same afternoon, in a cottage not far from Shibuya, Matsuzaki Kōdō, a Confucian scholar, observed a flock of white cranes, "skimming over the hill" (as he wrote in his diary)[1] from the direction of Aoyama. He recorded their appearance the following morning, too, "wheeling northwards in the sunlight," his unmistakable delight suggesting just how reassuring it was that these stately and auspicious birds should show themselves at such a time. No era could have had so propitious an opening. Matsuzaki was equally happy with the new era name itself – "Tempō," or Heavenly Protection. It was well known that selecting era names was a delicate business, for the least carelessness – the use of Chinese characters already encumbered with unhappy associations, or those inviting ominous paranomasia – could well prejudice the prosperity of the entire nation. In this case, there seemed nothing to fear. The two characters for Tempō, as the elderly scholar construed them, paid tribute to two previous eras, the first being the Tenna era (1681–83) and the second, the Kyōhō era (1716–35). Matsuzaki did not need to remind himself that for scholars at least, both periods carried favorable overtones, suggestive of new hope, of depravity reformed, and of righteousness restored. This, too, augured well for the future.

Unhappily, in the course of the next fourteen years, these expectations were to miscarry. True, the Tempō era is remembered as one of Japan's great periods of reform. In the central government, the Tokugawa bakufu, it ranks with Kyōhō and Kansei as one of the "three great reforms," and equally significant, all around the nation, the provincial rulers, or daimyo, were also swept along on a wave of regenerative enthusiasm. Culturally, as well, the Tempō era saw one of Japan's great flowerings. This, after all, was the time of Hokusai's *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*, his *Eight Views of Ōmi*, and his famous

1 Matsuzaki Kōdō, *Kōdō nichireki*, 6 vols. (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1970–83).

waterfall series; when Hiroshige (whose *Fifty-three Stages of the Tōkaidō* began to appear in 1832), Kuniyoshi, Eisen, and Kunisada were at their peak. Some of Japan's most notable painters, too, men like Tanomura Chikuden, Tani Bunchō, and Watanabe Kazan, were active in the 1830s. The famous *Edo meishozue* appeared in the Tempō era, as did large sections of two of Tokugawa Japan's runaway literary successes – Takizawa Bakin's *Nansō Satomi hakkenden* and Ryūtei Tanehiko's *Nise Murasaki inaka Genji;* so did the complete version of a third, Tamenaga Shunsui's *Shunshoku umegoyomi*, which was published in 1832. Add to this the activities of thinkers as diverse as Hirata Atsutane, Ninomiya Sontoku, and Aizawa Seishisai, and we have a cultural profile as varied and distinguished as any part of the Tokugawa period can present.

Nevertheless, despite its auspicious opening, its reforms, and its cultural achievements, the Tempō era was to prove calamitous for both the common people of Japan and those who ruled over them. In terms of human misery and social dislocation, only the Temmei era (1781–88) caused more havoc, whereas for damage inflicted on Tokugawa Japan's system of government, the Tempō era had no peer. Indeed, Matsuzaki Kōdō quickly came to have his doubts. Just a few hours after his cranes had wheeled off toward Aoyama, he found himself speculating on two extraordinary phenomena: first, there had been earth tremors in Kyoto, a city in which they were virtually unknown, and second, the cherry trees had come into flower with uncanny disregard for the season. He was both puzzled and afraid at these portents: "Our ruler is virtuous, and our habits upright," he wrote, "so there should be no reason for any disasters. . . . All we can do is pray for the Heavenly Protection of yesterday's new era name." Two days later he was still uneasy, filling his diary with notes on previous earthquakes.

THE TEMPŌ FAMINE

In fact, his unease was premature, for real tragedy did not strike Japan until 1833, the fourth year of the Tempō era, and when it came, it proved to have nothing to do with earthquakes. The problem was the weather. It was unusually cold during the spring planting of 1833, exceptionally so during the summer growing season (to such a degree that in some areas farmers were obliged to bring out their padded winter clothing), and the autumn saw abnormally early snowfalls. Whereas the spring had been dry, itself an ominous sign, the summer was, unfortunately, wet, with high water covering the young rice plants for as much as four or five days at a time. The result was a general crop failure, in which rice, particularly sensitive to any but optimal conditions, was the chief victim but in which other staples like wheat, barley, and even bamboo shoots were also severely damaged as well.[2]

As was always the case, the worst effects were felt in the northeastern part of Japan, the Tōhoku. The cool climate there accommodated agriculture only grudgingly, and rice growing, needing an average temperature of twenty degrees centigrade during the crucial months of July and August, had always been particularly hazardous. In 1833, the Tōhoku yielded only 35 percent of its normal crop, and in some specific areas – Sendai, for example – it was much less than that. Farther to the south and west, in places like Hiroshima, the harvest was also poor.[3]

By itself, one bad season was an irritation rather than a tragedy. No doubt many would have reacted initially like the Sendai farmer at the beginning of 1834, writing laconically in his journal, "No New Year celebration; no *sake*."[4] Temporary suffering could always be alleviated by the distribution of food and seed. But tragically, 1833 was to be just the first in a run of bad harvests. The next two years were only marginally better, and the harvest of 1836 was infinitely worse. Even in Edo that year, as Matsuzaki Kōdō's diary shows, it rained almost incessantly throughout the summer. It was cold, into the bargain; on July 13 and 14 (5/30 and 6/1 by the lunar calendar), Matsuzaki was obliged to wear his winter cape, and on the night of August 25 (7/13 by the lunar calendar), one of his friends saw city roof tiles encrusted with frost. Once again the effects of this extraordinary weather were felt chiefly in the Tōhoku, where the harvest was estimated to be only 28 percent of normal, but this time they were spread over a far wider area. At Mito, 75 percent of the rice crop and 50 percent of the wheat and barley crop were lost, whereas at Tottori, over on the Japan Sea, only 40 percent of the harvest was salvaged. Indeed, there were complaints of crop damage as far afield as Hiroshima and even Kokura, in Kyushu.

There was a grim parallel to be drawn here, as contemporaries knew. Matsuzaki Kōdō certainly did: "The weather this year is almost exactly the same as it was in 1786," he noted in his diary, and so did

2 See, for example, Saitō Shōichi, *Ōyama-chō shi* (Tsuruoka: Ōyama-chō shi kankō iinkai, 1969), p. 101; *Miyagi-chō shi, shiryō-hen* (Sendai: Miyagi-ken Miyagi-chō, 1967), p. 700.

3 *Rekishi kōron* (Tokyo, 1976), vol. 9, pp. 33–4.

4 *Miyagi-chō, shiryō-hen*, p. 802.

Ninomiya Sontoku, observing what he called "the worst harvest in fifty years."[5] Just fifty years earlier, in 1786, a similar spell of weather had brought on the Temmei famine, with its legacy of deserted villages, unburied corpses, and tales of cannibalism. This time the season was almost as bad. Indeed, in some respects it was worse, for the bad weather was more widespread and affected some areas left largely untouched by the earlier catastrophe, like Tottori, for example, where officials estimated what happened in 1836 to be "worse than the fearful Temmei famine."[6]

As Susan Hanley and Kozo Yamamura have pointed out,[7] it is not easy to estimate how many died in the famines of the Tokugawa period. In 1836, we are told, over 100,000 starved to death in the Tōhoku, and in Echizen the following year the death rate was three times the normal figure. In Tottori, officials were claiming that of a total of 50,000 people in distress, 20,000 died. The difficulty is, of course, that these figures were all too often thrown together on the basis of hasty and confused impressions, as there was little real opportunity for counting heads. Officials, moreover, safe in the knowledge that no one would ever check, could afford to exaggerate the distress in areas under their care; in fact they could hardly afford not to, as aid would go only where the need seemed greatest.[8]

Nevertheless, there is ample evidence to suggest, if not prove or quantify, that the famine that reached its height in 1836–7 was a crisis of no ordinary proportions. The reports of people eating leaves and weeds, or even straw raincoats, carry a certain conviction; so do the instructions circulated in some areas to bury corpses found by the roadside as quickly as possible, without waiting for official permission. Nor is there any reason to disbelieve reports of mass movements out of the countryside, with people descending on towns and cities "like a mist," to be greeted by gruel kitchens if they were lucky or otherwise by doors hurriedly barred with bamboo staves by nervous householders. There is, too, the evidence of some reliable figures. In 1833, at the very beginning of the famine, the Tokugawa bakufu had received 1.25 million *koku* of tax rice from its widely dispersed holdings; in 1836, when the harvest was universally bad, that amount had dwindled to 1.03 million *koku*, an indication of something out of the

5 Kodama Kōta, ed., *Ninomiya Sontoku*, vol. 26 of *Nihon no meicho* (Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha, 1970), p. 452. 6 *Tottori-han shi* (Tottori: Tottori kenritsu toshokan, 1971), p. 610.
7 Susan B. Hanley and Kozo Yamamura, *Economic and Demographic Change in Preindustrial Japan, 1600–1868* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 147.
8 *Rekishi kōron op. cit*; *Tottori-han shi*, pp. 615, 621.

ordinary. The price of rice is also suggestive. In Osaka, during the summer of 1837, it was fetching three times its 1833 price; in Echigo the cost had risen fivefold. In Edo, a little later, it was more expensive than it had ever been.[9]

The effects of the Tempō famine were felt everywhere. They were felt first in the countryside, where those whose crops had failed were forced to compete for dwindling supplies with such little cash as they could muster. The cities were the next to suffer, as prices rocketed upwards. "What shall I do?" a despairing Matsuzaki Kōdō asked in his diary as rice suddenly grew more expensive, "What shall I do?" Nor were the samurai unscathed. All around Japan domain governments, anticipating lower revenues and higher costs, tightened their belts, reducing samurai salaries in the process. There was, too, a more general problem connected with the famine. "A sickness is spreading," wrote the Sendai farmer nervously in 1834, all thoughts of *sake* forgotten, and spread it did, right through the 1830s, in a variety of forms – pestilence, smallpox, measles, influenza – among those too weak to resist.[10]

CIVIL DISORDER

Not surprisingly, the people who suffered most from the hunger of the 1830s quickly made their unhappiness known. Popular unrest had always mushroomed during famines, and the 1830s proved to be no exception. What was now exceptional was the depth of the resentment displayed, for in the frequency, scale, and violence of its popular protests, the Tempō era came to surpass any previous period in Japanese history. The people were unusually fretful in the 1830s, and their behavior showed it. Indeed, even before the famine there were symptoms of abnormal ferment. As early as 1830, for example, there had been an extraordinary outbreak of *okagemairi*, the peculiar form of mass hysteria during which vast numbers of people, young farmers for the most part, spontaneously set off on a pilgrimage to the Grand Shrine at Ise. This in itself was not so unusual. *Okagemairi* had been erupting, at roughly sixty-year intervals, for a long time; the last one had taken place in 1771. By 1830, therefore, the sexagenary cycle having run its full course, Japan was due for another, so there was no

9 Imaizumi Takujirō, ed., *Essa sōsho* (Sanjō: Yashima shuppan, 1975), vol. 2, p. 311; Ōguchi Yūjirō, "Tempō-ki no seikaku," in *Iwanami kōza Nihon rekishi* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1976), vol. 12, p. 329.
10 Fujikawa Yū, *Nihon shippei shi* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1969), pp. 62–3, 110–11.

surprise when it came. Nor was there surprise at concurrent reports of such miracles as shrine amulets floating down from the sky. Rumors of *prodigia* like this, spreading from village to village, were the customary call to pilgrimage. Rather, it was the scale of the 1830 outbreak that was so extraordinary. In 1771, two million had visited Ise; now within the space of four months, there were five million, jostling, singing, shouting, begging (or occasionally stealing), and all fighting their way into the shrine precincts.[11]

The authorities naturally were nervous. They were never comfortable when unruly bands of people strayed about the countryside, disrupting the placid agricultural round. But although they were not to know it, worse was to come. The 1830 *okagemairi* was soon to be dwarfed by developments that, if far less spectacular, were infinitely more threatening. From 1831 onwards, and particularly in 1836, Japan was struck by a wave of unprecedented popular protest. Opinions differ on just how much there was, but Aoki Kōji, whose research on the subject is by far the most detailed, has credited the Tempō era with a total of 465 rural disputes, 445 peasant uprisings, and 101 urban riots, the two latter categories reaching their peak, like the Tempō famine, in 1836.[12] There is general agreement that no matter how many incidents there were or how they are classified, Japan had never before seen such civil commotion.

Mere numbers alone, however, do not explain why the disorder of the Tempō era was so remarkable. To understand this, it is necessary to look at certain aspects of the incidents themselves, for they displayed features that were both new and alarming. The rural uprisings, for example, seemed to be of a new kind. Before, such protests had followed a fairly predictable pattern, with a delegation (normally composed of traditional village leaders), representing a fairly limited area (a few villages, at most), presenting local authorities with a list of demands – usually for tax relief, for freedom to sell their produce at the highest price, or for the replacement of officials seen to be dishonest or unsympathetic. After a ritual show of solidarity, these demands would be put politely, in the expectation of at least some concession. Elements of this tradition persisted into the Tempō era, but they were overshadowed by unmistakable signs of something quite new.[13]

First, the scale was different. Now, instead of a few villages, whole

11 Fujitani Toshio, "*Okagemairi*" *to* "*eejanaika*" (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, shinsho ed., 1968), pp. 32, 78–9.
12 Aoki Kōji, *Hyakushō ikki sōgō nempyō* (Tokyo: San'ichi shobō, 1971), app. pp. 31–2.
13 Miyamoto Mataji, ed., *Han shakai no kenkyū* (Kyoto: Minerva shobō, 1972), p. 535.

regions were caught up; in 1831, in Chōshū, for example, a routine demonstration against the domain's cotton monopoly suddenly spilled over into fourteen similar incidents, in which more than 100,000 people terrorized the entire area.[14] In 1836, too, during the famine, the Gunnai region north of Mt. Fuji saw an incident involving an estimated 30,000 angry, hungry protestors – an event without parallel, according to one contemporary observer, "even in old military histories and chronicles." Just a month later, another 10,000 demonstrators plunged the province of Mikawa into uproar, while in 1838 almost the entire island of Sado – some 250 villages in all – rose in anger.[15]

Such numbers made it inevitable that the control wielded by traditional village leaders over the direction of protest would crumble. Uprisings on this scale simply would not respond to direction, as one of the initiators of the Mikawa rising found to his dismay when rioters included his house on the list of those to be burned down. Further, because almost all the participants were poor and often desperate, they were not nearly so amenable to the wishes of their richer fellows. At Gunnai, indeed, where the unrest was initiated by an elderly farmer (one of the poorest in his village) and a peripatetic mathematics teacher, the poor provided leaders as well as followers, and that was not all. One of the features of that incident was the enthusiastic participation of people from outside the area, "not just the poor," it was remarked, "but gamblers, vagabonds, and those posing as *rōnin*."[16] The new scale of rural protests may to some extent have reflected difficulties peculiar to the Tempō crisis, but their changing composition spoke eloquently of the social polarization through which many country districts had been split irrevocably into rich and poor. So, too, did the violence, for these incidents, no longer directed by gentleman farmers, were anything but gentlemanly. In fact, as often as not, the gentleman farmer class was the object of mob hatred. It was their houses, stores, granaries, breweries, and pawnshops that were ransacked and burned during the Tempō unrest. This was so in Chōshū, in Mikawa, and in Gunnai (where more than five hundred buildings were treated in this way); even on Sado Island 130 gentleman farmers felt the force of local discontent.[17]

Sooner or later, all these incidents subsided or were put down, leaving the authorities free to step in and make a few examples –

14 Aoki, *Hyakushō ikki sōgō nempyō*, pp. 225, 277–84. 15 Ibid., p. 242.
16 Aoki Michio, *Tempō sōdōki* (Tokyo: Sanseidō, 1979), pp. 194, 197.
17 Thomas C. Smith, *The Agrarian Origins of Modern Japan* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1959), pp. 180–200.

torturing some, crucifying others, or imposing sentences of banishment or punitive tatooing. But all were concerned by the new kind of rural protest. "If we have another bad harvest," warned Tokugawa Nariaki, daimyo of Mito, in 1837, "I think there will be trouble."[18] They were to find urban unrest no less disconcerting. Tokugawa Japan had three of the world's largest cities – Edo, with over a million people, and Osaka and Kyoto, with something less than half a million each – as well as a further fifty or so substantial provincial centers, all with at least ten thousand inhabitants. Such concentrations of people, most of them highly vulnerable to food shortages and price fluctuations, had proved volatile before, during the Temmei famine. In the hunger of the 1830s they were to prove so again, with an unprecedented succession of riots, or *uchikowashi,* from the autumn of 1833 onwards. The Osaka authorities had to cope with eleven such incidents, whereas even in Edo, despite its intimidating preponderance of samurai, the common people rioted on three occasions. Elsewhere, too, there was unrest – in Kyoto, Sendai, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Kanazawa (where, in 1836, a mob of three hundred irate women broke into Zeniya Gohei's store demanding rice and money). Once again estimates vary, but Kitajima Masamoto claims no fewer than seventy-four urban riots for the Tempō era, a totally disproportionate 20 percent of all such incidents during the Tokugawa period.[19]

This was bad enough, but in 1837 Osaka saw planned – and very nearly executed – the most menacing urban disorder of all, on a scale unseen since the great conspiracy of 1651. The instigator was Ōshio Heihachirō, a former government official, then in his forty-fifth year. Some years earlier, allegedly disappointed at the corruption of his fellow officials in Osaka, he had surrendered his career as a police inspector to devote himself to reading, writing, teaching, and, apparently, collecting weapons. Then, early in 1837, at the height of the famine, he circulated copies of an angry document entitled *Gekibun* (A call to arms) to villagers around Osaka, summoning the common people to an attack on the city.[20] He carefully disclaimed any general challenge to the government, but the implications were obvious. "We must first punish the officials, who torment the people so cruelly," he wrote, "then we must execute the haughty and rich Osaka merchants.

18 Quoted in Kitajima Masamoto, *Mizuno Tadakuni* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1969), p. 208.
19 Kitajima Masamoto, *Bakuhan-sei no kumon,* vol. 18 of *Nihon no rekishi* (Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha, 1967), p. 418.
20 I have used the version contained in *Koga-shi shi: shiryō kinseihen* (*hansei*) (Koga: 1979), pp. 695–7.

Then we must distribute the gold, silver, and copper stored in their cellars, and the bales of rice hidden in their storehouses." These sentiments, coming from one of Ōshio's former rank and current reputation, were disturbing. So, too, was the subsequent rising, in which Ōshio and three hundred supporters tried to take over the city. It was suppressed readily enough, within twelve hours, and succeeded in changing the condition of the poor only insofar as it burnt down 3,300 of their houses and destroyed an estimated forty to fifty thousand *koku* of rice.[21] Nevertheless it provoked a widespread sensation. Its reverberations were to be felt throughout Japan, in the "growing unease" noted by Fujita Tōko among the official class and in a general undercurrent of excitement among the common people, where it was fed by rumors and copies of Ōshio's *Gekibun,* surreptitiously distributed. It also found its emulators in smaller risings at Onomichi, Mihara, Nose, and, three months later, at Kashiwazaki, on the west coast of Honshū, where a group of insurgents, again led by a scholar from the samurai class, attacked government offices.[22]

THE FOREIGN THREAT

In the midst of this mounting unrest, Japan had to confront yet another difficulty, a threat from abroad. The policy of national isolation, imposed early in the seventeenth century, had remained intact for two hundred years, but by the beginning of the Tempō era there seemed reason to believe that it might not do so for much longer. The West was drawing nearer, as the ever-more frequent sightings of foreign vessels in Japanese waters attested. Already, to counter it, the Tokugawa bakufu had issued instructions in 1825 that all such ships were to be driven off at sight, but this was often more readily said than done. The Tempō era had hardly begun when Matsuzaki Kōdō wrote in his journal of reports of an armed clash in Ezo between local residents and foreign sailors.

The first really serious shock, however, came in the summer of 1837, while the authorities were still digesting the Ōshio rebellion. In August that year a privately owned American vessel, the *Morrison,* left Macao for Japan. On board were Charles King, an American businessman, whose idea the voyage was, and his fellow countryman, Samuel

21 Ōguchi, "Tempō-ki no seikaku," in *Iwanami kōza Nihon rekishi,* vol. 12, p. 336; *Koga-shi shi,* p. 698.
22 Okamoto Ryōichi, "Tempō kaikaku," in *Iwanami kōza Nihon rekishi* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1963), vol. 13, p. 218.

Wells Williams, a missionary; these representatives of God and Mammon were accompanied by seven Japanese castaways. Some days later, at a rendezvous in the Bonin Islands, the ship was joined by Dr. Charles Gutzlaff, a German missionary who had entered British employ at Canton as an interpreter. Ostensibly, the *Morrison*'s mission was to repatriate the castaways, but the trinity of God, Mammon, and Whitehall perhaps had other aspirations as well. Whatever they were, there was to be no opportunity to convey them – or the castaways either, for that matter – to the Japanese. On August 29, the *Morrison* anchored in Edo Bay, on the Tokugawa bakufu's very doorstep. The next morning, without any warning, it was driven off by gunfire from the shore batteries, a welcome that was repeated at Kagoshima a few days later.[23]

In itself, the *Morrison* incident, although unsettling to the Japanese, was of no great significance. Admittedly, they were taken aback to learn, the following year, that in repelling an unauthorized foreign vessel they had also, albeit unwittingly, condemned seven compatriots to permanent exile. This could never be construed as an act of Confucian benevolence, and the guilt was later to return, in grossly distorted form, to haunt them. Still, the memory of the *Morrison* was soon blotted out by more ominous developments. Later that same year it was rumored that Great Britain, already known as the reputed possessor of vast wealth, an extensive empire, and a limitless capacity for violence, was about to annex the Bonin Islands, some six hundred miles to the south. The report, as so often the case, proved exaggerated. British businessmen and officials had discussed the possibility in a desultory fashion for some years, but a survey in 1837 simply served to confirm what they all suspected: that annexation was pointless.[24] Nevertheless, to the Japanese, aware of the survey but not of its outcome, it was undeniably disquieting.

In 1840, when officials in Nagasaki received the first accounts of an armed conflict between China and Great Britain, the disquiet blossomed into panic. This time the rumors were not exaggerated, for the skirmishing between the British and Chinese at Canton the previous year had developed into a full-fledged war. The British proceeded to win it with a dispatch that, reported faithfully in Edo, left the Japanese in no doubt that their great and powerful neighbor faced a humiliating defeat. In the autumn of 1843, reports of the Treaty of Nanking confirmed their worst fears. Great Britain had come to the Far East to

23 W. G. Beasley, *Great Britain and the Opening of Japan, 1834–1858* (London: Luzac, 1951), pp. 21–6. 24 Ibid., pp. 16–20.