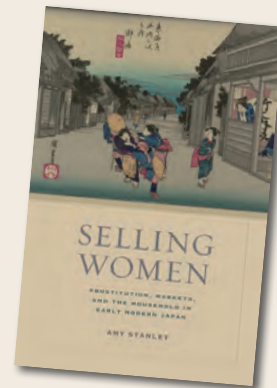


## BOOK REVIEW

*Selling Women:  
Prostitution, Markets, and  
the Household in Early Modern Japan*

Amy Stanley

University of California Press, 2012  
282 pages. ISBN 978-0-520-27090-9



A welcome addition to scholarship on early modern Japan, Amy Stanley's *Selling Women: Prostitution, Markets, and the Household in Early Modern Japan* is both a narrative of prostitutes' lived experiences and "a history of social and economic change in early modern Japan" (p. 8). Beginning in the early seventeenth century and ending in the mid-nineteenth century, the book analyzes prostitution in six locations. Each time and location sheds light on critical social and economic developments in early modern Japan. Together, the book's chapters illuminate how and why the sex trade changed over the course of the early modern period and why it varied in different parts of Japan. By examining criminal case records, diaries, petitions, and an assortment of other primary documents, Stanley brilliantly shows how the formation of the Tokugawa status system in the seventeenth century and the expansion of the market economy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries affected the degree to which prostitutes could protect themselves from abuse at the hands of brothel owners and other men (p. 156).

Like Japanese language feminist histories of the early modern period, *Selling Women* interprets the status order as a gendered order. The term "gendered order" denotes the view that the patriarchal household was an essential component of the Tokugawa status system. But Stanley departs from existing feminist histories of the status system in arguing that, although the gendered order was an unqualified form of oppression that imposed severe limitations on women's autonomy, it also afforded women protections they lacked before the mid-seventeenth century.

In adopting this approach, Stanley references John W. Hall's still influential notion of the status based "container society" to examine the status of women during the early modern period. As Hall argued, the institutions that Hideyoshi, Ieyasu, and their successors implemented constituted "...a new and more bureaucratic system of administration in which authority was exercised impersonally toward legally defined groups and classes rather than through links of paternalistic subordination."<sup>1</sup> This new bureaucratic system of administration, wrote Hall, was both oppressive and liberating, much like a container. As he explained: "Containers can be conceived of as prisons, or they can be thought of as protected arenas within which all persons of a given status can expect equal treatment under

1 John W. Hall. "Rule by Status in Tokugawa Japan." *Journal of Japanese Studies* 1:1 (1974), p. 44.

the law.”<sup>2</sup> Historians of status such as David Howell have analyzed the ways in which the status system acted as a protected arena for men of different statuses, but have generally overlooked its impact on women. Stanley fills this lacuna by examining how Tokugawa legal innovations in the mid-seventeenth century sorted women into “legally defined groups.”

The first of the book’s two parts, which focuses on the first two hundred years of the Tokugawa regime, documents how the Tokugawa status system of rule transformed women from “property held by their household heads into female subjects of the state” (p. 16). In Chapter 1, Stanley looks at the diary of Umezu Masakage, a general mine magistrate who lived in northern Honshū in the town of In’nai Ginzan. In his diary’s pages, Stanley finds that in the early seventeenth century Masakage and other men treated women as assets: husbands sold their wives to settle debts, fathers used their daughters as collateral, and officials, like Masakage, viewed prostitution as just another industry that could be taxed.

In the second chapter, Stanley’s narrative shifts to mid-seventeenth century Edo, where she illustrates how the shogunate’s decision to regulate prostitution created a legal distinction between wives and prostitutes, where none had before existed. The shogunate’s legal innovations as well as the rhetoric that undergirded them, which Stanley calls the “logic of the household,” gave women a measure of power to resist the absolute authority of fathers, husbands, and brothel owners. In Chapter 3, Stanley mines criminal case records from Nagasaki for examples of this resistance (p. 14).

One of the strengths of *Selling Women* is its clever design. By examining the remote town of In’nai in the first chapter and then Edo and Nagasaki in the second and third chapters, Stanley is able to illustrate the geographic variations of the sex trade as well as the process of broader societal change that Tokugawa legal developments wrought. This structure of the book reinforces Stanley’s argument in a way that a study of prostitution in a single city would have been unable to do.

In the book’s second section, Stanley explores how the market revolution impacted on women in general and prostitutes in particular. Much of the historiography of Tokugawa Japan has presented the growth of a market economy as a positive phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> Most recently, Laura Nenzi has argued in *Excursions in Identity: Travel and the Intersection of Place, Gender, and Status in Edo Japan* that the rise of a travel industry was liberating for many women. Stanley offers a different perspective. The commercialization of agriculture and the popularization of travel in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries led to an expansion of prostitution beyond the major cities. This expansion, Stanley argues, ushered in a “logic of the market,” which curtailed prostitutes’ ability to rely on the “logic of the household” to resist the authority of brothel owners (pp. 105, 189).

As Stanley demonstrates, the “logic of the market,” as well as local attitudes about prostitution, differed according to a region’s place in the sex trade. In Chapter 4, we see that samurai officials in cities like Niigata loosened regulations on prostitution in order to increase revenue sources, and in so doing, privileged economic interests over the ideal of the patriarchal household (p. 118). Elite commoners from villages in late eighteenth century northern Kantō, deeply unsettled by market relations supplanting patriarchal authority, complained about prostitution’s destabilizing impact on their communities (p. 109). In

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2 Hall. “Rule by status,” p. 44.

3 E.g. T.C. Smith’s *The Agrarian Origins of Modern Japan*; R.P. Dore’s *Education in Tokugawa Japan*.

Chapter 6, Stanley uses a conflict between the parents of a teenage prostitute named Tora and the proprietor of the brothel in which she worked to illustrate how the economic situation in the Inland Sea in the mid-nineteenth century brought the “logic of the market” and the “logic of the household” into conflict.

*Selling Women* is an entertaining book that successfully meets its ambitious objectives. It shows that Tokugawa institutions had a discernable, and in ways positive, impact on the lives of women in general and prostitutes in particular. It also demonstrates how the rise of a market economy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries destabilized the status quo in different local regions and actually worsened the lives of prostitutes. Amy Stanley presents these arguments in lucid prose in a well-organized monograph, accessible to specialists and graduate students alike. *Selling Women* ranks among the most engaging and innovative books on the Tokugawa period recently published.

**Reviewed by Richard Evan Wells**