history to experiment with reading and interpreting material and visual sources in addition to the documentary sources that are considered the heart of the historical enterprise. The same care must be exercised in reading objects as is required in reading a text, of course, and it is important to avoid fetishizing the various relics of the past portrayed in this book's pages as more honest or authentic simply because they are old. These precautions aside, this catalogue, along with numerous other recent museum publications in Japanese history and culture, should be a standard tool in the research and pedagogical arsenal of any scholar of early modern Japan.

Morgan Pitelka
Ph.D. Candidate
East Asian Studies
Princeton University


The cover drawing of Esenbel's Even the Gods Rebel depicts a Japanese farmer carrying a spear and clad in traditional protest garb. For many readers, the drawing will evoke the image of a desperate peasant on the verge of a vengeful, destructive act against those who have engineered his exploitation. Indeed, the uprising described by Esenbel in this book—the 1871 Nakano uprising—was intensely violent and destructive: in addition to razing over five hundred residences and commercial establishments in the town of Nakano, bands of villagers set fire to the prefectural office compound and brutally murdered two government officials. Government reprisals were also harsh: over a hundred protestors were imprisoned or exiled, and twenty-eight were executed. Culling information from confessions and other first-hand accounts, Esenbel reconstructs the narrative of this uprising and recaptures the sense of drama, expectation, anger, and betrayal that surrounded it.

However, Esenbel's account of the uprising itself comprises only about one-fourth of the book. The remainder is devoted to a detailed description of Takaino, the village that led the uprising. In particular, Esenbel focuses on the integration of Takaino into the commercial market, exploring the impact of that integration upon the economic and political life of the village during the century preceding the 1871 uprising. And for much of that period, Takaino was at peace. In fact, the pervasive image of the Takaino villager in Esenbel's book is not that of a defiant, spear-toting rebel, but a calculating, prosperous farmer with a hoe in one hand, an abacus in the other, and a considerable wad of cash in his pocket. While Esenbel's narrative of the uprising is gripping, it is this "background" discussion of commercial development in Takaino that provides the forum and the evidence for Esenbel's main arguments, and enables her to connect the details of the uprising to the larger debates in the historiography of Tokugawa and Meiji Japan.

The first such debate concerns the impact of the commercial market upon the Japanese farm household and village community. Esenbel takes issue with scholars who see this impact in terms of impoverishment and social dissolution. Employing the argument of Samuel Popkin (and also echoing the scholarship of Susan Hanley and Kozo Yamamura on Tokugawa economic development), Esenbel depicts Takaino villagers as "rational peasants" who freely sought out the opportunities provided by the commercial market in search of surpluses not available in a subsistence economy. She finds evidence of certain trends often cited as proof of rural immiseration—for example, high rates of tenancy and the decreasing size of landholdings by the majority of villagers. However, she argues that in Takaino, these
trends simply reflect the increasing numbers of villagers who were able to earn income from by-employment production or skilled labor in a commercial economy. Furthermore, Esenbel maintains that this involvement of Takaino villagers in the commercial market did not result in the village's dissolution, countering the common assumption that late-Tokugawa rural conflict signified the breakdown of rural communities along class lines. Family, lineage, neighborhood, and village ties remained powerful in Takaino, and actually served as the organizing principles for conflict. In fact, Esenbel contends that community solidarity in Takaino had, if anything, been strengthened in late Tokugawa, due to the fact that small landholder/tenants and nouveau riche landlords were able to wrestle control of village governance from traditional elite families of samurai descent. This political coalition of class enemies, bound together against a common foe, reorganized village government along more inclusive, more democratic lines, thus warding off some of the class conflict that erupted in other areas of Japan.

But if household incomes were growing and community structures remained intact, why did the villagers of Takaino rebel? Esenbel answers this question by placing episodes of conflict in the context of a larger, continuous process in which Takaino residents negotiated with authorities to maintain favorable tax conditions. Violent uprisings were merely a last-ditch maneuver in this negotiation, employed only when other strategies failed to produce results. Usually, such measures were not necessary. Esenbel argues that peasants successfully "nibbled" away (in James Scott's words) at harsh tax conditions, winning significant concessions from local government on tax conversion rates, payment schedules, and other factors critical to the calculation of the overall tax burden. Thus Esenbel rejects the concept of "exploitation" when discussing Tokugawa rural society, attacking another pillar in what she calls the "impoverishment/exploitation/social dissolution" model of rural conflict. Not only does the word disguise the fact that the surpluses of farm families were, according to Esenbel, actually increasing, but it also misrepresents the nature of the Tokugawa political order, which was highly decentralized, allowing commoners a great deal of agency in manipulating the system to their own advantage. Villagers were not simply victims of policy, Esenbel argues, but actively contributed to its formation and revision. Furthermore, Esenbel maintains that villagers' ability to influence the conditions of rule only increased during the political chaos of the Bakumatsu period.

However, soon after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the new government began to take steps not only to increase villagers' tax burden, but also to tighten central control over local taxation. These steps threatened to limit the ability of Takaino villagers to maneuver for more favorable tax conditions. Takaino villagers responded with rebellion, a strategy that had met with great success in the Tokugawa period. What they did not realize, however, was that the Meiji government no longer recognized the legitimacy of this tactic, and had no intention of participating in any sort of negotiation with villagers over tax conditions. The loose and flexible "arrangement" (in Esenbel's terms) that villagers had enjoyed was over, thus instantly changing the meaning of their rebellion and turning them into enemies of the state. Esenbel repeatedly stresses, however, that the protestors had no revolutionary aims. They made no demands for rights or privileges they had not already possessed under the Tokugawa order: they wanted only to return to previous tax arrangements. Esenbel characterizes the uprising as a "reactive conflict," using Charles Tilly's term to describe a defensive
protest against new incursions by the modern state. Takaino villagers' rising expectations, created by years of growing surpluses from the commercial market and by peasants' increasing leverage in their negotiation with authorities over local tax conditions, met up against the aims of a central government that was determined to standardize local tax conditions to its own advantage.

Scholars of peasant protest will undoubtedly debate some of Esenbel's conclusions. In particular, some will see her portrait of the late-Tokugawa peasant household economy as too rosy, despite her attempt to dispel such notions in her concluding chapter (p. 257). Indeed, regardless of one's position in the "growth vs. immiseration" debate, any discussion of the benefits of participation in the commercial market should also include a clear recognition of the new anxieties produced by the reliance of farm households upon that market. Such a recognition is especially important in an analysis of late-Tokugawa and early-Meiji rural uprisings, which were informed so deeply by a sense of unprecedented crisis and vulnerability. On the other hand, these factors have already been well-documented by scholars of rural protest, so one cannot fault Esenbel for downplaying them in order to emphasize less-explored factors—such as rising incomes and family and community networks—that also influenced some late-Tokugawa and early-Meiji uprisings.

Scholars might also take issue with Esenbel's estimation of the extent of villagers' negotiating power within the Tokugawa political order. She discusses this negotiation in terms of mutual compromise between government and village society, but in Esenbel's account it seems as if the government is doing all the compromising. Though perhaps overstated, her point is a crucial one: governments cannot simply dream up systems of domination and exploitation with only their own maximum possible benefit in mind. Or rather, governments can dream up such systems, but their implementation always involves some degree of compromise with local practices and interests. Esenbel demonstrates convincingly that such a compromise did occur between villagers and government, thus allowing villagers to have a voice in the ongoing process of creating tax policy. Of course, it was the ruling authorities who determined the boundaries of any negotiation—for example, they decided which issues were negotiable, and also identified the legitimate techniques of negotiation. Furthermore, as Herman Ooms has argued, Tokugawa villagers' willingness to press for their interests within those boundaries often worked to encourage the legitimation of the overall structure of status inequality. Nevertheless, given the obstacles to successful collective pressure by Tokugawa villagers, we should perhaps marvel at the effectiveness of popular opposition. In fact, while Esenbel maintains that this dynamic of negotiation ended when the Meiji state consolidated its rule—she notes sadly that the new state's uncompromising stance toward the 1871 Nakano uprising signified the end of any sort of reciprocal arrangement—I would argue that the negotiation between villagers and the state continued throughout the Meiji period. The terms of the negotiation had changed radically, but local society nevertheless continued to influence the direction of state policy and the overall process of state formation.

Esenbel's account of the "failure" of the Nakano uprising and the end of the feudal arrangement is significant, for it highlights a distinction between her perspective on the Meiji Restoration and that of the dominant strain of postwar scholarship influenced by modernization theory. In many ways, Esenbel's book echoes the major themes of modernization theory, for it adopts a positive view of the impact of the
commercial market on Tokugawa village society, pointing to growing surpluses, the maintenance of communal harmony, and a rising standard of living. Most modernizationists argue that these "early modern" developments, in turn, made possible a rapid yet consensual process of change in the Meiji period; in other words, Japan's dramatic transformation during the Meiji period resulted from a cooperative relationship between a modernization-minded government and an already-modernizing populace. Esenbel, in contrast, identifies both a source of fundamental discontinuity between Tokugawa and Meiji and a major point of conflict between the Meiji state and the Japanese people. This source of discontinuity and conflict was the entirely new relationship between state and society enforced by the Meiji government. In Esenbel's narrative, the flexible Tokugawa order, which allowed peasants to influence local administration, stands in contrast to the intrusive, uncompromising Meiji state that suppressed the Nakano uprising. In this sense, her portrayal of the Tokugawa-Meiji transition resembles the tragic narrative of loss and betrayal one often finds in the work of Marxian or "People's History" (minshūshi) historians, except that she rejects the notion of the Restoration as a failed or betrayed revolution. Rather, the tragedy in Esenbel's narrative is the passing of the Tokugawa order and its systemic values of flexibility, local agency, and compromise; Esenbel repeatedly uses the term "feudal" (perhaps too unproblematically) to describe the Tokugawa period, but the term's connotation is quite positive. Esenbel does not discuss the Tokugawa-Meiji transition in such explicitly positive or negative terms; nevertheless, the implicit narrative behind her analysis is worth pointing out, if only because it represents an unusual mixture of elements from very different historiographical traditions.

If there is a flaw in this book, it is Esenbel's tendency to overstate her revisionism. Although her perspective on rural uprisings is quite similar to that of James White, her book does contain a healthy dose of original and provocative ideas. However, her desire to set up her own argument in categorical opposition to what she calls "mainstream scholarship" sometimes prevents her from engaging the ideas of individual scholars in a more meaningful way. For instance, while she accurately identifies the "exploitation/impoverishment/dissolution" model used by many Marxian scholars to analyze rural conflict, she lumps the work of William Kelly, Stephen Vlastos, and Anne Walthall into this category without recognizing the important ways in which these scholars depart from this model. These scholars would also be surprised, I'm sure, to be grouped (not explicitly, but de facto) with "mainstream scholarship" that strips peasants of agency by reducing their actions to larger structures. But these shortcomings in Esenbel's discussion of the existing literature on rural conflict do not substantially detract from her own research, which is solid and careful. Her case study of Takaino village and the Nakano uprising provides us with valuable insights into the critical issue of the commercialization of the household economy and its relationship to rural uprisings.

Brian Platt
Department of History
George Mason University


In this work, Marleen Kassel discusses Hirose Tansō, who established the Kangien academy in Hita, Kyushu, in 1817. In the course of his career at Kangien, Tansō taught some 3,000 students,