Prologue

From the beginning Heaven seemed to show its displeasure with the government of the fifth Tokugawa shogun Tsunayoshi. As the ceremonies on his accession were being held in the eighth intercalary month of Enpô 8 (1680), heavy rainstorms and earthquakes caused damage to roofs and walls at Edo castle, and a tidal wave brought death along the shore. Fire broke out in the city, and as the smoke rose, strange objects were seen flying in the sky. In the countryside storms and floods were devastating the harvest, causing rice prices to skyrocket and famine to inflict Japan.1 When earthquakes and storms had abated, on a perfectly still day, the cross bar of the large stone gate at the Sanô shrine mysteriously collapsed, causing the stones to bleed. Some people, however, suggested that it was not the stones that were bleeding but the blood of bats crushed between the tumbling debris that tainted the earth.2

When Tsunayoshi’s government came to an end nearly three decades later with his death on the tenth day of the first month of Hôei 6 (1709), opinions were similarly divided. Heavy downpours ended a long drought the very day he passed away, and continuous rain, sleet, and snow caused his funeral to be postponed. As if to inflict pain on the realm’s dignitaries even in death, ceremonial garments were splashed with dirt and the muddy road proved extraordinarily dangerous when Tsunayoshi’s funeral procession finally made its way from Edo castle to the ancestral temple at Ueno on the twenty-second day of the first month.3

Overwhelmed by grief, some courtiers following the procession had shaven their heads and donned monk’s robes to show that their secular life had come to an end.4 In the household of the grand chamberlain Yanagisawa Yoshiyasu, Machiko, the daughter of the Kyoto noble Ôgimachi Dainagon, was to compare the late shogun to the revered king Wen of ancient China. During the thirty years of his reign, she asserted, he did not make a single mistake. He never ceased caring for his people; till late into the night he had sat bent over his books to perfect the way of government.5

Others, however, were of very different opinion. On learning of the shogun’s death, Konoe Motohiro wrote in his diary: “Indeed, in the entire thirty years of this shogun’s government nothing good has happened. The complaints
of the people have increased daily. His death will be the fulfillment of a long-
cherished wish for his heir in the Western enceinte who has been waiting impa-
tiently to succeed. When this sad news reaches the provinces will people secretly
rejoice? It is better not to speak about it, better not speak about it.”

Motohiro was the father-in-law of Ienobu, Tsunayoshi’s nephew, adopted
son, and successor. As a man of forty-seven, Ienobu was no doubt anxiously
waiting in the wings to take over the government of the country, and Motohiro’s
opinion might well have been colored by the desire to reap the benefits that
would come to him once his son-in-law became shogun. But he was also one of
those many high-ranking men whose expectations of promotion had been shat-
tered with the accession of the fifth shogun. When the rule of precedent should
have guaranteed Motohiro in Kyoto the high imperial appointment of kanpaku
(regent) in Tenna 2 (1682), he was passed over at the instigation of the ruler at
Edo, causing Motohiro and his family enormous grief and loss of face. It took
eight further years until he finally obtained the coveted appointment.

Motohiro’s wholesale condemnation of the fifth shogun’s thirty years of
government was echoed many times over in the following decades and centuries.
It also appears in the Dutch sources, where the diary of the Dutch factory at
Deshima notes that “instead of mourning, there is a lot of joy at the Shogun’s
death and many lampoons circulate, especially about his avariciousness.”

The Story of the Three Kings

The essence of such lampoons is contained in Sannō gaiki (The unofficial record
of the three kings), an anonymous piece of writing that circulated around Edo
soon after the short-lived government of the sixth shogun and the even briefer
one of his infant son, the seventh shogun Ietsugu. Parodying the government of
the last three shoguns, it reserved the greatest flight of the imagination, derision,
and mockery for that of the fifth shogun Tsunayoshi. He was described as the ar-
chetype of the corrupt and cruel ruler, given to bouts of anger during which he
would kill members of his entourage with his sword. In an effort to distract him
from such aggressive behavior, his grand chamberlain Makino Narisada urged
him to call Confucian scholars and Buddhist monks, as well as nō actors, who
performed “day and night.” But the shogun’s most notorious commands con-
cerned the protection of dogs. Samurai, until then accustomed to cut down of-
fending commoners, were no longer permitted to harm even a dog. Those who
did forfeited their lives. Such shogunal orders, Sannō gaiki claimed, were not
based on rational considerations. After Tsunayoshi’s only son had died in child-
hood, a Buddhist priest had persuaded his superstitious mother that since the
shogun was born in the astral Year of the Dog, the lack of an heir was due to of-
fenses against dogs in his previous life. Only the protection of dogs would secure
him the birth of the desired son. With his unnaturally strong attachment to his mother, *Sannō gaiki* continued, the shogun heeded this advice, and hence men were killed for the sake of dogs. This earned Tsunayoshi the title of "Dog Shogun" (*inu kubō*), a name by which he is still popularly known today.9

The author of *Sannō gaiki* was widely believed to be the Confucian Dazai Shundai (1680–1747), but in a society where criticism of government incurred heavy punishment, it would have been unwise for him to attach his name to the outrageous and obviously spurious claims made in the text. Much as the contemporary Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1724) transposed the plot of his puppet play satirizing Tsunayoshi’s government, *Sagami nyūdō senbiki no inu* (The thousand dogs of the Sagami priest), to the Kamakura period in the hope of evading the censors, so in *Sannō gaiki* the scene was set in ancient China. Mocking Tsunayoshi’s attempt to model himself on the three sage kings of ancient China, the work was given a solemn title and written in the style of the Chinese classics.10

With its erudite style of writing and contrasting outrageous statements, *Sannō gaiki* appealed to the humor of the times. Its popularity increased rapidly, and in its wake a number of other, similarly fictional works with sensational claims about the life and government of the fifth shogun and his chamberlains began to appear. By the nineteenth century the scholar Matsuura Seizan (1760–1841) felt cause to lament in his *Kasshi yawa* (Evening tales of months and years past) that while at first everybody knew the content of these works to be spurious, over the years people began to consider them true. He condemned Dazai Shundai for the spread of false scholarship and advised his readers to consult instead Machiko’s *Matsukage nikki* (Diary written in the shade of a pine tree) to learn the truth about the government of the fifth shogun.11

*Sannō gaiki* cleverly mixes fact and fiction, often making it difficult to determine where one ends and the other begins. Tsunayoshi’s laws for the protection of dogs are well documented, and so are death sentences for killing dogs. Yet the notion that these laws were due to the shogun’s birth in the astral Year of the Dog finds no support in reliable sources, as will be shown in some detail later. Although this was pointed out by Miyazaki Eiga as early as the 1920s, most histories pay no attention to this fact. Scholars generally recognize that a number of events described in *Sannō gaiki*, such as the shogun’s murder by his consort, are fiction, since other materials describe in great detail his infection with measles, which were epidemic at the time, and his failing health. But when *Sannō gaiki* seems to provide the outrageous specifics for vague, difficult-to-interpret remarks in reliable sources, many writers succumb to the temptation of livening up their accounts with citations from this work. Thus it has come to be used to impute meaning in generally reliable sources beyond that contained in the original text and is cited without further qualifications along with serious primary material. Even *Tokugawa jikki*, the official bakufu annals, generally regarded as a
collation of reliable primary sources and a standard reference work of the period, on occasion cites Sannō gaiki without further explanation or warning. In a curious fashion, a short piece of writing initially intended as a joke has come to color the image of the thirty-year government of the fifth Tokugawa shogun. A question that has so far not been adequately addressed is why the bakufu, which so effectively suppressed all other political criticism, permitted Sannō gaiki not only to circulate, but also to generate a large number of other, similarly libelous works about the period.

The Genroku Period

Yet even when strictly adhering to reliable, contemporaneous writings, the historian is left with a highly ambiguous picture of the period. While samurai sources often describe the period as one of suffering, the ebullient novels of the popular Ihara Saikaku (1642–1693) speak of unprecedented wealth and a rise in living standards. The Genroku period (1688–1704), forming the core of Tsunayoshi’s thirty-year government, is recognized as one of unprecedented cultural flowering and good living. Such prosperity was not to be experienced in Japan again until the postwar boom of the Shōwa period, leading to the expression Shōwa-Genroku.

The image of the downtrodden, suffering population is also contradicted by the detailed observations of a foreign visitor. Employed as physician by the Dutch East India Company for their settlement at Nagasaki, the German scholar Engelbert Kaempfer was able to survey living conditions during two trips from Nagasaki to Edo some ten years after the accession of the fifth shogun. Like his fellow residents on the small manmade island of Deshima in the harbor of Nagasaki, on which he was confined for the greater part of the time, Kaempfer was indignant about the prisonlike conditions suffered at the hands of the Japanese. Yet in spite of his complaints, Kaempfer’s appraisal of Japanese society was positive. While fully aware of the shogun’s infamous Laws of Compassion that forbade the killing of animals, he observed a well-functioning society, with none of the suffering so eloquently described in Japanese records. To the contrary, he praised the fifth shogun as a wise and compassionate ruler. Kaempfer’s voluminous record became the standard reference work on Japan throughout Europe until the opening of the country in the middle of the nineteenth century and ironically secured for Tsunayoshi in Europe the praise as sage ruler he was denied by his own people.

Judge in Hades

Now, for a long time, the historian has passed for a sort of judge in Hades, charged with meting out praise or blame to dead heroes. . . . When the
passions of the past blend with the prejudices of the present, human reality is reduced to a picture in black and white.

Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*

The fifth shogun has been judged harshly by historians, but there have always been scholars who have attempted to paint a more differentiated picture by investigating what motivated the political actors of this period. Their explanations have had relatively little impact, however.

Condemnation of the fifth shogun invariably includes condemnation of his grand chamberlain Yanagisawa Yoshiyasu (1658–1714), often described as fawning minion, who encouraged the shogun in his vices while himself arbitrarily wielding the powers of government. Already at the end of the nineteenth century, the scholar Sakata Morotô in some thirty years of painstaking work examined all available documentation pertaining to these charges. He came to the conclusion that they were not justified and that Yoshiyasu was, to the contrary, one of the most enlightened ministers of his age. Yet in spite of its meticulous scholarship the work remains unpublished.15

Towards the turn of the twentieth century, Japanese scholars were attempting to gain a more comprehensive view of the Tokugawa era, and the theory of alternating periods of strong and weak government evolved. In this analysis the early reforms of Tsunayoshi were ascribed to his early grand councilor Hotta Masatoshi and seen as strong government, while the later period under Yanagisawa Yoshiyasu was seen as weak.16 The standard histories that appeared in the first half of the twentieth century, such as Ikeda Kôen’s *Tokugawa bakufu jidai shi* (History of the era under the Tokugawa bakufu), Tokutomi Iichirô’s (Sohô) *Kinsei nihon kokumin shi* (History of the Japanese people of the premodern era), and Mikami Sanji’s *Edo jidai shi* (History of the Edo period), all basically conform to this view.17 Primary sources are generally quoted at length, especially in Tokutomi’s impressive multivolume work, but no consideration is given to the writers’ intent or other circumstances that might have colored their contents. Thus Tokutomi describes *Sannô gaiki* as a bold, outspoken account containing the unadorned truth and cites it at length when it suits his argument. Where fabrications are all too obvious, as in the matter of Tsunayoshi’s death, Tokutomi reverts to reliable material, qualifying his citation of *Sannô gaiki* by noting that it was understandable that such rumors circulated among the populace.18 Quoting “sources” selectively in this fashion with the preconceived idea of the evil ruler, the picture of Tsunayoshi as the corrupt oppressor of a hapless population is not difficult to corroborate.

While the above scholars demonstrated a genuine concern to adhere to “sources,” other publications in reputable journals took even greater liberties. In 1903 an article titled “About the Mental State of Tokugawa Tsunayoshi” in
the venerable *Journal of the National Medical Association* (of Japan) by the scholar Irizawa Tatsukichi suggested that Tsunayoshi suffered from an illness for which the author used the high-sounding German term *zoophilomanie*. And even in 1970 an article in the scholarly journal *Japanese History* claimed that under the fifth shogun some three hundred people were executed daily for offenses against dogs.

At about the same time that Miyazaki Eiga attempted to refute the myth of Tsunayoshi having protected dogs on account of personal superstitions, another scholar, Kurita Mototsugu, argued in a series of articles that Tsunayoshi’s government was one of the high points of the Tokugawa period. Tracing a change from militarism (*budan shugi*) to civil administration (*bunji/bunchi shugi*), he suggests that the administration of the fifth shogun made an important contribution to this process. Excerpts from Sakata’s painstaking work also became available to the public in a book-length work on Yanagisawa Yoshiyasu by Hayashi Masaru, where long passages were quoted verbatim without acknowledgment of the source. The shogun’s much maligned chamberlain was also reappraised by Tsuji Zennosuke, paying special attention to his religious and philosophical ideals and activities. Zennosuke’s son, Tsuji Tatsuya, accorded Tsunayoshi’s administration new importance by pointing out how some of its political strategies prepared the ground for the Kyōhō era reforms under the eighth shogun Yoshimune. Tsuji Tatsuya’s important contribution in the *Cambridge History of Japan* makes some of his scholarship available to those without Japanese language skills. In English the work of Donald H. Shively and Harold Bolitho deserves mention as well.

The most detailed work on the government of the fifth shogun has been done by Tsukamoto Manabu, who since the 1970s has been publishing first articles and later books dealing mainly with the much maligned Laws of Compassion. In 1998 he published a monograph on the personality and government of the fifth shogun, and, as is evident from the notes, my work makes ample use of Tsukamoto’s research.

The image of the fifth shogun has thus become a far more differentiated one over the years. Japan’s school history books, however, still maintain that he protected dogs on account of his love for this animal, based on his birth in the Year of the Dog of the Chinese calendar. Most modern publications still decry his administration as corrupt. Even Tsukamoto Manabu, though dismissing much criticism in the sources as libel, concludes his study on an ambivalent note.

One criticism that surfaces repeatedly is that Tsunayoshi was greatly attached to his mother, who came to exercise undue influence over him and hence over the politics of the country. Documentation well supports his strong bonding to his mother, a woman born as a commoner. Her influence over the shogun is generally viewed as simply yet another flaw in his degenerate character. I
would argue, however, that the mother’s influence presents a more complex question and that it constitutes a “blind spot” in the appraisal of the government of the fifth shogun.

**Blind Spots**

“The individual is the carrier of both his species and his culture. Cultural practices, like genetic traits, are transmitted from individual to individual,” notes the anthropologist B. F. Skinner. Yet Erik H. Erikson has pointed out that scholars have not always paid heed to this fact, especially with regard to the legacy from the mother. He has labeled this “the blind spot” and argues: “Historians and philosophers recognize a ‘female principle’ in the world, but not the fact that man is born and reared by women.”

Such arguments assume importance in an analysis of the personality and policies of the fifth shogun. Here an unusually strong bond existed with the mother, an outsider, who had spent her early formative years as member of a class with cultural practices differing widely from that into which Tsunayoshi was born. Other Japanese rulers had mothers of low social status. This was acceptable in a society where the woman was merely considered to provide the womb carrying the baby, and attachment of the young samurai to the mother was strictly avoided. Tsunayoshi was different in being permitted by a quirk of fate to form a deep mental bond with his mother, and he thus not only inherited her genetic traits, but also some of the culturally conditioned values of her class. I believe that these traits and the worldview of the mother, transmitted surreptitiously from the time of early mother-child bonding, resulted in Tsunayoshi’s rebellion against the values of the samurai environment in which he was otherwise raised. This shaped the administration of his domain even before his succession as the country's ruler, and the unorthodoxy of these early policies, duly recognized as such at the time, accounts for the opposition to his succession on the death of his elder brother.

Tsunayoshi’s mother Keishô-in is traditionally described as an uneducated, credulous, and superstitious woman. There is no evidence to support this image. To the contrary, the little reliable material available shows a resolute woman, with high expectations of her son and his government. It is likely that these expectations were transmitted early to the child and over time came to generate the image of the sage ruler Tsunayoshi attempted to model himself on. The ideal of the benevolent autocrat was confirmed in the Confucian classics he studied from a young age, where rulers governed a rural population with the help of well-trained and obedient ministers. In this utopian society of Chinese antiquity, feudal-type lords and samurai subjecting hapless commoners to their wishes, as happened in Japan, did not exist.
Tsunayoshi’s strong attachment to and esteem for his mother could not but result in respect and sympathy for the class from which she came. Such sentiments, however, entailed a drastic change in government ideology and policy that hitherto had permitted the samurai to discount commoners’ rights and arbitrarily exercise power over the commoners, even at a time when it was no longer military battles but production and trade that shaped everyday life.

The shogun found justification for his political ideology not only in the rapidly changing social environment of Japan, but also in the events on the continent. While he grew up, discontented commoners in China greatly aided the fall of the Ming dynasty, demonstrating the dangers of government ignoring the plight of the greater part of the population. Chinese Confucian scholars seeking refuge in Japan persuasively argued for the ideal of benevolent administration for the masses.

Political ideology according greater respect and rights to the common population entailed by necessity a reduction of the privileges, freedom, and status of the ruling class, the samurai. The opposition of the latter was inevitable, and so was the resulting struggle for authority between the shogun and the traditional holders of political power. I argue that all the policies of the fifth shogun, including the protection of dogs, are the outcome of and are consistently shaped by this struggle between a shogun relentlessly pursuing his political ideals and a military aristocracy equally fiercely defending their traditional rights.

In light of the suffering Tsunayoshi’s policies inflicted on the samurai, the nature and purpose of composition of source materials must be given careful consideration. This has not always been done with sufficient rigor, and I see this omission as a further blind spot in the analysis of the personality and government of the fifth shogun. The sources consist overwhelmingly of accounts written by samurai for samurai, upholding and reflecting the samurai point of view, selectively preserved and edited by a totalitarian government for political expediency. When expressions such as *tenka* (lit.: all under Heaven) appear in the sources, they have been taken to mean “all the Japanese population,” while in fact in the majority of cases they meant “everybody that mattered,” namely, the samurai population. “Popular lampoons” cited in samurai records were popular among the samurai class and not necessarily the rest of the population. Policies criticized by samurai writers as bringing suffering to “the whole country” were often of benefit to the commoners making up by far the largest part of the population.

How research based on conditions in farming communities fundamentally alters the picture of the period is apparent in the writings of Ōishi Shinzaburō. In his earlier work he roundly condemned the government of the fifth shogun in line with most of his colleagues. Yet after a detailed study of the economic progress in rural communities during his government, Ōishi com-
pletely changed his opinion and has since praised the fifth shogun as one of the most enlightened rulers of the Tokugawa period. But even Ōishi cannot come to terms with the Laws of Compassion. Since this area is beyond his field of specialization, he uncritically accepts the evidence and verdict of other historians.

In this volume I attempt to show that once these “blind spots” are taken into consideration, rather than illustrating the mindset of a madman, Tsunayoshi’s policies bear testimony to great political skill by which, without the use of military backing or financial reserves, the ruler succeeded in imprinting new standards of behavior upon the samurai. When the political changes under Tsunayoshi are examined in the light of Max Weber’s theory of political dominance (Herrschaftstheorie), the important role his government played in the development of the modern Japanese state becomes evident. Acceptance that the government of the fifth shogun, rather than evil and corrupt, was to an unusual degree competent and progressive permits a new reading of Ogyū Sorai’s work and the realization that his political philosophy owes much to this shogun. To understand how a future military ruler was permitted to come under the sway of a greengrocer’s daughter and to espouse an ideology much to the detriment of the military class, I will begin by examining Tsunayoshi’s unusual inheritance on both his father’s and his mother’s side.