

An East Asian Early Modernity?  
*Kinsei* in Japanese Scholarship on Japanese and Chinese History

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Already by the beginning of the twentieth century historians in China and Japan had adopted Western scholars' tripartite stadial conception of history divided into ancient, medieval, and modern eras and applied it to their own histories. Like their Western counterparts, Asian historians regarded the medieval epoch as an ignoble dark age of isolation and ignorance. Japanese historians in particular saw strong parallels between the decentralized political system, warrior elites, and pervasive Buddhist faith of the era of the shoguns (from the twelfth to the nineteenth centuries) and the feudal world of Latin Christendom before the Renaissance. Yet some Japanese historians, conscious of the rapid transformation of Meiji Japan in contrast to late Qing China, were dissatisfied with the standard tripartite periodization. In 1903 Uchida Ginzō adapted the term *kinsei* 近世 (“recent age”) as a fourth period, distinctive to Japanese history, interposed between the medieval (*chūsei* 中世) and modern (*kindai* 近代) eras. In Uchida's view, Japan's *kinsei* era—which he identified with the uncontested rule of the Tokugawa shoguns from 1616 to 1853—was marked by rapid advances in industry, commerce, and intellectual and cultural life that promoted “citizens' life” (what historians today might call “civil society”) and provided the necessary foundation for Japan's rapid transition to modernity.

While many historians (especially in the immediate postwar era) rejected Uchida's sunny assessment of the Tokugawa era, the four-part division of Japanese

history incorporating a *kinsei* era extending from the sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century became a permanent feature of Japanese historical consciousness. Meanwhile, beginning with Naitō Kōnan the so-called Kyoto School of Japanese historians of China also adopted the idea of *kinsei*, but with significant differences: they regarded *kinsei* as a universal stage of history, and one that had a more explicit connotation of modernity. As formulated by Miyazaki Ichisada in his influential 1950 book, *East Asia's Modern* (i.e., *kinsei*) *Age*, China's *kinsei* period began in the Song dynasty (960-1279) and was marked by a renaissance of classical learning (which he explicitly likened to the later European Renaissance), the formation of a unified (absolutist) state, the creation of a money economy, and dynamic urban and commercial growth. But in the postwar period Miyazaki's hypothesis was largely overshadowed by the mainstream Marxist scholarship, which identified the Song not as the incubator of an incipient modernity, but rather as the beginning of China's feudal epoch.

In the last fifteen years the concept of *kinsei* has undergone fundamental revision both within scholarship on Japanese history and in Japanese scholarship on East Asian history. A new trend toward situating Japanese history in larger Asian/world-historical contexts has renewed debate over the meaning and significance of *kinsei* and broached the question of whether we can speak of an East Asian *kinsei* era. Historians of continental societies have taken the lead in this endeavor, as most historians of Japan continued to regard the *kinsei* era as a unique feature of Japanese history. Western scholarship, notably the world-systems theories of Immanuel Wallerstein and Andre Gunder Frank, has influenced the thinking about an East Asian *kinsei*. However, the

Wallerstein and Frank models have found few adherents. Instead, proponents of an East Asian *kinsei* have stressed cross-cultural interactions and parallel developments among East Asian societies, Southeast Asia, and other parts of Asia (such as the “gunpowder empires” of West, Central, and South Asia), relegating the encounter with the West to a secondary level of stimulus. Most recently, we also see a shift among historians of Japan toward a more expansive view of *kinsei* in two respects: on the one hand there is greater recognition of Japan as part of a pan-East Asian *kinsei*, and on the other hand a new emphasis on continuities rather than discontinuities in the transition between medieval Japan and subsequent *kinsei* epoch. With few exceptions, though, Japanese historians continue to eschew “early modern,” a category deemed too deeply tinged by Eurocentrism.