

## "Reimagining the Intellectual Landscape of 'Early Modern Japan'"

Samuel Yamashita (Pomona College)

“Early Modern Japan” has been periodized in several ways by Japanese and Western scholars. Beginning in the 1930s Japanese Marxists characterized the extended period that corresponds to the Tokugawa period (1600-1867) as “feudal,” although they disagreed on how long they believed the “feudal” to have persisted in Japan: one group argued that the “feudal” ended in 1868 with the Meiji Restoration and another argued that it persisted beyond 1868 and engendered an “absolutist state.” After World War II American scholars used the theory of modernization to frame Japanese history: they located the beginnings of “modernity” in the seventeenth century and argued that this explained Japan’s successful transformation into a modern state in the late nineteenth century; and one scholar—John Hall—even suggested that Japan’s modernization might have begun in the sixteenth century. We now know that this reading of Japanese history was a product of the Cold War and had a clear political objective: it was meant to recast Japan as a new ally of the Free World and to hold up its “successful” modernization as a model for other non-western countries embarking on the same journey.

The Marxist and modernization interpretations of “early modern Japan” are problematic in many ways. They are clearly constructionist and offer interpretations of Japanese history inspired by theory. They are also orientalist: scholars using these approaches looked for historical phenomena that resembled what happened in Europe or for the functional equivalents of what existed in Europe. So, for example, the Marxist historians searched for examples of progressive or evolutionary change over time, particularly, the emergence of capitalism and the first signs of class conflict. The modernization historians looked for Japanese analogues for Enlightenment values and practices—notably, what Max Weber called “rationalization,” the “Protestant Ethic,” the “disenchantment with magic,” and so forth.

There is a third interpretation of early modern Japan that focuses on “Confucianism.” Here I am referring not to the popular view that Confucianism was the state ideology of the new Tokugawa government, the standard view presented in Japanese history textbooks in this country for many years, but to Theodore DeBary’s more complex vision of a Japanese Confucianism that was part of a larger “Confucian tradition” found not only in Japan but also in China and Korea. His notion of a “Confucian tradition” is a useful heuristic device and I myself use it in my lectures on Song and Ming China and Yi Dynasty Korea. But deBary’s conception of “Confucianism” looks a lot like Christianity, as Ian McMullen observed several years ago, and calls to mind the picture of a Renaissance human tradition painted by deBary’s Columbia colleague Paul Kristeller. Is deBary’s “Confucian tradition” the East Asian equivalent of the “Hinduism” that British scholars constructed with the help of Indian *pandits* and used to represent “India”?

I would add that the concept of “*Bushido*” has served similar purposes in the western literature on Japan: *Bushido* is presented as a foundational Japanese tradition and is used to explain many things, including the modern Japanese state’s aggression and militarism, and even the “Rape of Nanking.” “Zen Buddhism” too served similar purposes and offered an ostensible philosophical basis for a Japanese culture that was said to be quintessentially aesthetic. “Zen” is seen as the good tradition and “*Bushido*” as the bad tradition.

The challenge for historians is, first, to recognize the orientalist impulses that fathered these conceptions and the search for a Euroamerican doppelgänger. Second, historians also need to identify what one scholar described as a “social reality that is systematically different from one’s own” and “to explain its

specific logic and momentum.” In my paper I would like to propose that we recognize the unmistakable narcissism of the term “early modern” and that we search for what is precisely not “early modern” or “modern” in Japan between the late 1500s and the 1800s.