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Introduction

Placing Modern Japanese History in the Twenty-First Century

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A central condition of modernity is that all the major and many minor institutions of society reach deeply into the lives of every individual. Universal schooling, military conscription, public health, factories, railroad travel, daily newspapers, cinema, and restaurants are some of the many modern institutional arrangements that have reshaped human lives across the globe. Engagement with them simultaneously standardizes and differentiates people in ways that connect them to each other in an increasingly integrated world. This does not mean all individuals have the same experiences: at every level, modernity is an uneven condition.[1] Furthermore, we humans all participate in making modernity in every social and cultural domain, by our actions, in our bodies, through our senses (including our sense of humor), and with our desires.

Despite the fact that thinking in terms of nation-states can obscure this foundational aspect of the modern condition, Japan-watching remains highly useful for both comparative and integrative purposes. It provides a ringside seat to all the big trends of modern history and has also for the last 150 years been an extraordinarily fast-changing place, as is clear from the chapters in this volume. This rapid pace was already underway in 1868 when a new government not only centralized political power in Tokyo but also upended the old social order based on hereditary status in favor of a new and very different one. No one in Japan since the mid-nineteenth century could look back to a childhood that would seem familiar to their grandchildren. Moreover, Japan was the first non-Western society to become a modern nation and empire, to industrialize, and to deliver a high standard of living to virtually all

[1] Harootunian, *Uneven Moments*. Prasenjit Duara develops this theme further by arguing that this is one big process, rather than a nationally replicated one; Duara, "Circulatory Histories."

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its citizens, a major reason why it has captured international attention ever since. Because the Japanese so comprehensively and determinedly acted to reshape global hierarchies, their modern history was an incredibly destabilizing presence for the world. This intense dynamism has powered many debates and conflicts, both within Japan and with people and places beyond Japan's shores. Put simply, Japan has packed a lot of history into less than two centuries. This volume presents twenty-four distinct interpretations of that dynamic and interesting process.

Before and After the Meiji Revolutions

Japan's nineteenth-century political revolution, commonly known as the Meiji Restoration, is still a crucial marker of modernity. But our sense of what that milestone means has become far more nuanced and less ideological, in a long-term trend that was already underway in 1989 when the first edition of the modern volume of the *Cambridge History of Japan* appeared. What has changed most is our understanding of Tokugawa society and why a small group of disaffected individuals embraced massive social changes that radically downgraded the basis for their own high social status as members of Japan's samurai elite. While the pragmatism, clarity of purpose, and bold inventiveness of the young revolutionaries who seized power in 1868 remains remarkable, their indebtedness to legions of others should not surprise us, given that historians generally reject a mental model of "path dependence" followed by a sudden shock powerful enough to put History on a new course. Generally, we prefer to trace various antecedents and also acknowledge that eventual outcomes are never certain until they occur. Careful investigation of anything that seems like a sudden major change always reveals a broad array of earlier, sometimes modest but cumulatively consequential, transformations that interacted to produce the new configuration. Conversely, even places that experience revolutionary upheaval also always retain some major social continuities.

The fall of the shogun's regime is easier to understand if we stretch the boundaries of what constitutes "political culture." As we learned from Harry Harootunian's essay on the culture of play in the first edition of the *Cambridge History of Japan*, other Japanese contributed to this massive social shift in ways that historians too rarely recognized as political. Harootunian focused on the phenomenon of spontaneous pilgrimages, in which large numbers of peasants and poor urbanites simply threw down their hoes, hammers, and sewing needles and took to the road without requesting a travel permit. This was

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one way that commoners expressed their dissatisfaction with the Tokugawa regime, according to Harootunian, and because samurai of the day understood this as political behavior, they helped nudge everyone toward the conclusion that rule based on hereditary social status could not continue.[2] As is clear from Volume II of this edition of the *New Cambridge History of Japan*, edited by David L. Howell, this expanded definition of the "political" has enriched Japan studies ever since, allowing historians to flesh out the social, diplomatic, and cultural worlds of Edo-era Japan.

Since at least the early 1990s, Japan scholars have moved away from the dueling doctrines of Marxism and modernization theory[3] – a move that has permitted them to step beyond the search for "class consciousness" or "the typical village community" or "classic feudalism" and instead to see and acknowledge that peasants and urban commoners – like samurai – lived rich and varied lives. Meanwhile samurai grievances – particularly impoverished lower-level samurai who resented the comparative financial security of upper samurai – explain why some of them embarked on "Japan's Aristocratic Revolution," as Thomas Smith noted many decades ago.[4] Sydney Crawcour laid out another enduring line of argument in the first edition of the *Cambridge History* when he stressed the great extent to which the shogun's own policies, particularly the requirement that lords travel to or from Edo every year (and leave their wives and children behind as hostages), inadvertently undermined its social and economic system, while David Howell and Maren Ehlers showed that the lines between social groups were already blurry by the 1850s. Thus, as Mark Ravina put it recently, "When the Meiji government dissolved formal status distinctions, it was merely acknowledging this transformation."[5] In short, people all over the archipelago, in a dizzying variety of settings, were active participants in making Japan modern from well before the Meiji Restoration.

Another index of modernity is a new understanding of the individual self. Here too there were important early modern antecedents that produced *both* distinctive cultural traditions *and* modern individuals. As Eiko Ikegami has persuasively argued, commoners' aesthetic and cultural activities flourished before the nineteenth century in ways that produced a "culture of civility" that helped Japan transition from a society based on hereditary status to a

[2] Harootunian, "Late Tokugawa Culture and Thought." E. H. Norman made the same point much earlier; see Dower, "E. H. Norman."
[3] Hein, "Free-Floating Anxieties."
[4] Smith, "Japan's Aristocratic Revolution."
[5] Crawcour, "Economic Change"; Howell, "Japan's 'Aristocratic Revolution' Revisited"; Ehlers, *Give and Take*; Ravina, *To Stand with the Nations*, 48.

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more egalitarian and multifaceted one. This too was fundamental to creating a modern political consciousness.[6] As Ikegami explains, "Bonds of civility had connected Tokugawa people, loosely but definitely, in a symbolic plane of commonality in spite of the meticulously segmented nature of the Tokugawa polity."[7] These people were not just appreciative of the arts but themselves became adept at their chosen aesthetic pursuits, many of which would later be canonized as cultural expressions of national identity. These included various styles of poetry, painting, performance, and music, as well as flower arranging, tea, bonsai, and calligraphy, or their perusal of the Chinese philosophical classical canon.

Ikegami's key point is that "the appearance of images of Japan as a country defined by aesthetic excellence was not the result of political initiatives on the part of rulers but was rather the product of people's networking and market forces." This "tradition of an aesthetic Japan inherited from the Tokugawa period" helped in "creating an image of Japan that connected the people to their own past in a distinctive way," and so became the basis for a shared modern political culture that predated the modern state. Eiko Maruko Siniawer argues here that Meiji-era people had little faith in political systems at the national level but developed a modern sense of citizenship closer to home through their participation in these overlapping local communities. While these groups were not overtly political in the Tokugawa era, they became so after 1868, in Siniawer's view. Tessa Morris-Suzuki makes a similar argument for the long arc of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, dubbing such local civic engagement "informal life politics."[8]

Attention to diversity regarding the historical development of the modern self also made it possible to look within households to appreciate the contributions of commoner women to political culture, as we know from Anne Walthall's remarkable body of work. More recently, Amy Stanley's prize-winning *Stranger in the Shogun's City* has continued this tradition. Many cultural circles, even early on, included women; and, as Laura Nenzi has shown, women both at home and on pilgrimages actively shaped what we now think of as national culture.[9] While the emerging sense of Japan as an

[6] David Howell makes a similar case for the very high rates of literacy and administrative skill in Howell, "Japan's 'Aristocratic Revolution' Revisited."
[7] Ikegami, *Bonds of Civility*, 364.
[8] Ikegami, *Bonds of Civility*, 367. Also see Siniawer, *Ruffians, Yakuza, Nationalists*; Morris-Suzuki, *Japan's Living Politics*; Morris-Suzuki and Soh, *New Worlds from Below*.
[9] Walthall, *Weak Body of a Useless Woman*, is a representative example. Stanley, *Stranger in the Shogun's City*; Nenzi, *Excursions in Identity*; Nenzi, *Chaos and Cosmos of Kurosawa Tokiko*.

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aesthetically sophisticated nation described by Ikegami for the nineteenth century could be and was later assiduously mobilized by the government to create a national artistic canon, as Asato Ikeda argues (Chapter 22), it was from the very beginning equally accessible to individuals who could do with it whatever they chose.[10] These aesthetic and cultural identities were – and remain – powerfully felt, widely shared, and completely legible to outsiders.

The transition to political citizenship created formidable new barriers as well as opportunities. While gender had been far less important than social status before 1868, citizenship now was constituted by male gender identity. Marnie Anderson (Chapter 13), argues that misogyny was built into the foundations of both the modern Japanese state and society, through new legal structures, educational criteria, scientific knowledge, and the configuration of the imperial family.[11] Indeed, the new concept of modern individuals capable of responsible political participation categorically excluded women, who were legally barred from attending or speaking at political gatherings. Nonetheless, as Andrew Gordon points out, photos and sketches of attendees reveal their presence.[12] For *burakumin* outcastes too, modernity did not necessarily mean less hierarchy or even different hierarchies, just new justifications for them, as Ian Neary discusses (Chapter 18).

Broadening "political culture" has not just entailed accepting all kinds of people as political actors, it has also led to greater appreciation for the choices made by the Tokugawa state, particularly the good reasons why it formally regulated but then ignored vast aspects of its domain, a typically early-modern form of statecraft developed to compensate for the fact that empires of this sort had far greater geographic scope than practical capacity to rule. Luke Roberts has argued that the Japanese shoguns managed this system through a tolerance for "open secrets" in which local people ritually acknowledged the legitimacy of rulers and also tidied away the signs of nonconforming practices whenever the sovereign's emissaries might be watching. They otherwise solved problems in different ways including through informal negotiation with shogunal officials, who maintained the rituals of submission without insisting on consistency in subsequent behavior.[13]

[10] Moreover, later Japanese who engaged in the same cultural pursuits understood their personal aesthetic practices as social meaningful activities that connected them to past practitioners in an intimate but transhistorical imaginative space. See Wakamatsu, "Tapestry of Literati Landscape."

[11] Ueno Chizuko has influentially argued that this was in part a "samuraization" of the lives of other classes; Ueno, *Modern Family in Japan*.

[12] Gordon, "Social Protest in Imperial Japan."

[13] Roberts, *Performing the Great Peace*.

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This strategy of governance underpinned foreign diplomacy as well. Tokugawa-era Japan cultivated sophisticated relationships of this nature at both its southern and northern edges because maintaining some political ambiguity in these border zones was in the interest of everyone involved. So, for example, Okinawa was presented – depending on who needed to know – as a tributary state to China, a vassal of Japan's southern domain of Satsuma, or as an independent kingdom. The Tokugawa government preferred this arrangement to direct conquest because it wished to retain a portal for relations with China without acknowledging China as its suzerain; China preferred the polite fiction that Okinawa was exclusively its vassal to forcing a situation that might require military action; and the Okinawans found opportunities in this sphere of ambiguity to serve their own interests, taking the initiative to promote extensive trade relationships with places other than China and Japan.[14]

These studies built on Ronald P. Toby's field-changing work beginning in 1977 on the diplomatic exchanges between the Tokugawa government and China, Korea, and Okinawa (and the carnival-like impact of their processions to and from Edo). Since then, the assertion that the Tokugawa regime operated as a "closed country" has slowly but steadily withered away. Japan was already integrated into the larger global environment before 1868, and "modernity" had a very long gestation – nurtured by many mothers at once. Japan studies has also benefited from the rich research stream that has focused on the avid participation of early modern Chinese, Koreans, Okinawans, and Southeast Asians in global exchanges.[15]

Recognition of Tokugawa Japan's multifaceted engagement with its global context has helped retire what was once the dominant question about the Meiji transformation: whether it was mainly caused by external pressures or was primarily a response to domestic challenges. Historians still differ on how to weight those stresses, but the stakes are now lower. The first set of scholars no longer fears that acknowledging the impact of Western imperialism will be read as claiming that the Asian past is only interesting when white people are the protagonists of the story. Meanwhile their interlocuters no longer worry that their attention to internal conflict will be interpreted as a mechanical misapplication of one-dimensional Marxism. Both groups have moved on to more interesting questions, many of them framed by Mark Ravina's assessment of

[14] Smits, *Visions of Ryukyu*.
[15] Toby, "Reopening the Question of Sakoku"; Smits, *Maritime Ryukyu*; Clulow, *Company and the Shogun*; Macauley, *Distant Shores*; Schlesinger, *World Trimmed with Fur*.

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the end of the shogun's order as "not a clash between 'modern' and 'traditional' or between 'Western' and 'Japanese' but a struggle to transcend these dichotomies and to create new institutions and practices that could simultaneously evoke both Japanese uniqueness and Western progress."[16]

Another reason why researchers have lost interest in determining whether the Meiji Restoration was caused by domestic or international triggers is that the two are hopelessly entangled. Like most of the world in the mid-nineteenth century, the new Meiji government faced intense and unavoidable pressures from abroad, and the great question was how to respond. In order to operate effectively in the wider world it had joined, the Meiji leaders – and many others – understood that Japan had to become legible to outsiders as a "civilized" society with modern governance and legal frameworks. In the late-nineteenth-century era of high imperialism, being civilized meant enacting many rapid and far-reaching social changes, as essentially everyone soon understood. Yet, unsurprisingly, there was substantial disagreement over which changes to make first, where to make them, and who should get to decide. While Japanese shared this dilemma with much of the globe's population at the time, as Franziska Seraphim explains (Chapter 17), Japan's relatively privileged geopolitical circumstances made it easier to initiate extraordinarily rapid and far-reaching social transformations. Yet that headlong pace also intensified the anxiety that stoked an ongoing sense of crisis.

That sense of crisis was in part centered on the urgent need to minimize the disruptions caused by intensive engagement in international trade and legal networks. Japan entered the global order with the disadvantage common to non-Western nations of the era; it was saddled with unequal treaties that denied the government the power to tax imports of goods or control the behavior of great-power nationals. Japan, like many other spots across the globe, was forced to rapidly modernize in response to the aggressive expansion of the leading colonial powers. As was common elsewhere, many Japanese responded to these pressures by framing economic activities as crucial to national identity, a preoccupation that suffused patterns of consumption even more than those of production.[17]

Japan was better poised than most to industrialize, but many of the key reasons were beyond anyone's control. Some of that initial advantage was due to qualities of Tokugawa society. The transportation and communication networks and tax structures created by the Tokugawa shogunate to control the

[16] Ravina, *To Stand with the Nations*, 5, 17, 58.
[17] Walker, "Mamiya Rinzo and the Japanese Exploration"; Dudden, "Mission Législatrice."

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feudal lords had the unintended effect of stimulating considerable economic growth, which domestically had mainly served to weaken the shogun's hold on territory. High rates of literacy also encouraged economic growth by disseminating new agricultural and craft technologies that underpinned the later and larger economy.[18] These technologies were already circulating globally, and Japanese participated in this flow far more than is generally understood. Treating the Tokugawa era as "early modern" means highlighting how much Japan was part of the extraordinarily consequential and far-reaching global circulation of ideas and objects, including scientific technology. Although the official policy of the shoguns was to bar most foreigners from 1635 to 1860, Japanese benefited from this global knowledge exchange in those centuries, as discussed in several chapters of Volume II.[19]

Some advantage was due to environmental good fortune. Brett L. Walker argues in Volume II of this publication that Japan was helped by the fishing opportunities provided by the Kuroshio Current, which not only supplied food but also, when the fish was processed into fertilizer, allowed annual rice harvests to double between 1600 and 1874 (see Figure 9.1 in this volume). Similarly, Japan made extensive use of the stores of iron and coal deposited eons before by the tectonic activity known as the Pacific Ring of Fire. This not only boosted domestic industrialization, it also provided nineteenth-century Japan with a trade good, coal, that the Western imperialists greatly desired. Walker is the foremost practitioner in Japan studies of what David Schoenbrun labels "multi-species ethnography," which begins with the assumption that humans share their history with other actors.[20] These can be nonhuman living actors, such as the mosquito, the smallpox virus, or rice plants, or can be ocean currents, earthquakes, and seams of coal. This approach diversifies our approach to historical causation, identifying new and different sources of change and compelling us to reexamine how we make meaning out of human life; and it also calls our attention to extraordinarily long historical processes, such as the ways that landscapes and people have been shaping each other for centuries.

Attention to early modern history anywhere also necessarily entails considering the development of capitalism, the great economic transformation of that global era. At the risk of oversimplification, the big shift in scholarship on capitalism has been away from the assumption that entrepreneurs

[18] Crawcour, "Economic Change"; Guth, "Modeling, Models, and Knowledge Exchange."
[19] Frumer, *Making Time*; Guth, "'Japanese Stand Today as Teachers.'"
[20] Schoenbrun, *Names of the Python*; Walker, *Toxic Archipelago*; Walker, *Lost Wolves*.

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in Britain invented and established a standard progression of changes, and toward a recognition that modern industrialized economies developed in many different ways. Thus, acknowledging a distinctive history for Japan is to identify an alternate path rather than a magically superior or a deformed kind of modernity, two opposing but previously widespread claims. Recognizing the fact that wide variation among modern economic systems is the norm also reduces the power of the assertion that modernity was synonymous with the west.

For example, David Howell has shown that in the early nineteenth-century Japanese economy, "proto-industrial" fishing operations in Hokkaido – with distinctive "interrelated developments in demand, labor, technology, capital, and state institutions" – nested within feudal structures, strengthening them in some ways and weakening them in others, but not supplanting them as a subsequent "stage" of development. Katsuya Hirano's more recent work on the vicious treatment of Ainu laborers within Hokkaido's "settler colonial" arrangement builds on Howell's argument that the fisheries combined elements of what were previously considered analytically different economic systems. Hirano argues that in the early years of the new Meiji state, Hokkaido had a particularly rapacious kind of capitalist modernity, characterized by "primitive accumulation," a Marxist term that originally explicitly excluded capitalist methods of amassing resources. Hirano repurposes the Marxist language in order to highlight his claim that the genocidal implications of settler colonialism (discussed later in "Settler Colonialism") were also squarely capitalist – and modern – in nature.[21]

Both Howell and Hirano emphasize the geographic heterogeneity of the Tokugawa and Meiji systems, in which the northern periphery operated differently than did the three main islands of Japan but was already incorporated into a single system linked to the global economy. In another way that capitalism is being reimagined, rather than seeing new economic relationships as emanating from Japan's central agricultural regions housing new textile mills, they focus on mining and other extractive enterprises, first in remote areas within the island archipelago and then on the Asian mainland. Toshihiro Higuchi concurs when he emphasizes the environmental dimensions of the Hokkaido fish-into-fertilizer industry, focusing attention on the exploitation of lands and seas.[22] The spatial analysis here renews what used to be known

[21] Howell, "Proto-Industrial Origins of Japanese Capitalism," quotation at p. 283; Hirano, "Thanatopolitics."
[22] Higuchi, "Japan as an Organic Empire." See Wu, *Empires of Coal*, for a dovetailing story.

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as economic geography, and its current incarnation integrates early modern and modern Japanese economic history with environmental history, while also highlighting the ways that these processes made places like central Edo/Tokyo more and more different from, say, shipping ports in Hokkaido.

Industrialization in Britain, as we all know, began with the invention of the spinning jenny and the reorganization of textile production in factories. By contrast, as Mark Metzler explains (Chapter 8), "the world industrial revolution happened in waves, and it was the second wave that hit Japan first." The "second wave" consisted of steam-powered technology, which created new forms of transportation, such as railroads and modern steel ships. This transportation revolution made a large integrated spatial network instantly central to the story of economic development. This network and its equally important twin, communication networks, also explains why the broad diffusion of new technological knowledge employed in agriculture and small-scale traditional industries was more central to Japan's nineteenth-century economic development than were actions taken by either the state or large industrial firms, as has been demonstrated by Takafusa Nakamura.[23]

Japan in Metzler's hands does look spatially distinctive: it began mobilizing far-flung resources in *both* unusually intensive *and* geographically extensive ways relatively early and then steadily continued to escalate both dimensions in the twentieth century, operating "at an intensification frontier" throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Moreover, this dual intensification had a major impact on the global economy. In another innovation, rather than focusing solely on economic activities that generated revenue and provided subsistence to humans, Metzler draws on "ecological economic history" to make visible the full range of ways that humans mobilized material flows and altered the planetary environment through the release of stored carbon. This intensified extraction of natural resources, especially fertilizer and coal, was a foundational Japanese strategy for industrialization from the start that literally powered Japan's economic development.

Japan as Both a Modern Empire and a Modern Nation

Nineteenth-century Japan also became an empire almost simultaneously with its establishment as a modern nation, and scholars now treat these two processes as tightly braided together and central to Japan's modern history.

[23] T. Nakamura, *Economic History of Japan*.

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