



Introduction

Genealogies of Japanese Early Modernity

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I introduce this volume of the *New Cambridge History of Japan* with two questions: How is it that Anglophone scholars have come to refer to the Tokugawa period (1603–1868) and immediately surrounding years as Japan’s “early modern” period? And does calling the period early modern suggest something fundamentally different from the term used in Japanese, *kinsei*? When the first *Cambridge History of Japan* was published, in 1991, the answer to the latter question was yes: the *kinsei* of “the Japanese” was “more feudal than modern,” whereas the early modernity of “Western historians” was “more modern than feudal.”¹ As we shall see, however, the term *kinsei* has nothing to do with feudalism. My interest in these questions is more than philological. The answers tell us something about the global history of conceptualizing historical time, particularly the surprising career of modernity.

Let us trace the genealogy of Japanese early modernity – that is, the history of “early modern Japan” as a historical period and the ironies of its emergence. To put my conclusion boldly, “early modernity” as a concept of periodization is older in East Asian historiography than it is in European historiography. Nuance and qualifiers await us in a few pages, but the use of “early modern” to describe Japan during the three centuries from the late sixteenth to the late nineteenth centuries is more than the imposition of a Eurocentric concept on Japan’s historical experience.

To be clear, we employ a conventional periodization scheme for this three-volume iteration of the *New Cambridge History of Japan*: premodern (everything up to about 1580), early modern (about 1580 to about 1880), and modern (everything since about 1880). This division of the volumes reflects the institutional taxonomy of Japanese historical studies in the Anglophone world: we are a community of premodernists, early modernists, and

¹ Hall, “Introduction,” 8–9, paraphrasing Wakita, “Social and Economic Consequences,” 96–98.

DAVID L. HOWELL

modernists. Colleagues in Japan generally divide their country's history into four broad periods: ancient (*kodai*), medieval (*chu-sei*), early modern (*kinsei*), and modern (*kindai*), with breaks at around 1185, 1580, and 1870. When they compile monumental multivolume national histories – something they do quite a lot – they generally follow this division, sometimes adding protohistorical and contemporary taxa at either end.²

Early Modernity

As a term of periodization, early modernity has a surprisingly short history in studies of Europe and a surprisingly long one in studies of East Asia. As Randolph Starn has pointed out, the use of early modernity to periodize European history is an Anglophone phenomenon; the progression from medieval to early modern to modern, familiar to readers of English, is medieval to modern to contemporary in continental Europe. Starn tells us, moreover, that the first references to “early modern Europe” appeared in print only in the early 1940s and that it took about three decades for the formulation to become a fixture in the historiography of Europe.³

Jack Goldstone argues that early modernity was originally the province of social and economic historians who wanted a way to characterize the long transitional period between the unraveling of the medieval world by about the end of the fifteenth century and the emergence of industrial capitalism in the early nineteenth century.⁴ They enumerated a checklist of characteristics – such as absolutist governments, the rise of merchant capitalism, and protoindustrialization – that helped to distinguish early modern societies from the feudal ones that preceded them and the fully modern (that is, capitalist) ones that succeeded them. The oldest articulation of this new periodization that I have found is an article by the economic historian Violet Barbour, who in 1940 characterized “this early modern period” of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a time when “living medieval rigidities were breaking down and new ones were forming, but these latter were not to reach full effectiveness until the succeeding period.”⁵

Early modernity in its initial iteration was not a Marxist concept per se, but it was particularly suited to a Marxist take on history, which saw the early

² For example, the authoritative *Iwanami kōza: Nihon rekishi* series, now in its fifth iteration (2013–15), employs this taxonomy in its twenty-two volumes.

³ Starn, “Early Modern Muddle.”

⁴ Goldstone, “Problem of the ‘Early Modern World.’”

⁵ Barbour, “Rigidities Affecting Business,” 290.

Introduction: Genealogies of Japanese Early Modernity

modern as the time after the feudal mode of production had begun to disintegrate but before the capitalist mode of production had taken root. In Marxist historiography, early modernity was a precapitalist – hence essentially feudal – formation, its forward-looking name notwithstanding. Non-Marxist scholars as well embraced the concept and eventually expanded its boundaries beyond political economy narrowly defined to include things like the spread of information networks, education, urbanization, secularization, and the emergence of a public sphere. By the time early modernity entered mainstream use among European historians in the 1970s, it was no longer necessarily tied to a narrative of transition from feudalism to capitalism. Rather, it had become a term of social and cultural history, employed by scholars whose work was quite distant from that of the Marxists and other functionalists who were its original natural constituency. Nowadays scholars of many persuasions use the term, and in that sense, it conveys nothing definitive about a user’s methods or outlook.

East Asian history early modernized a bit later, but it was not the laggard one might expect. In 1953, Lien-Sheng Yang reviewed Naitō Torajirō’s *Chūgoku kinseishi*, which he rendered as the *History of [Early] Modern China*.⁶ Naitō Torajirō (1866–1934), better known as Naitō Konan, was the most influential Sinologist in early twentieth-century Japan. As Yang’s square brackets suggest, Naitō uses “*kinsei*” to mean “modern,” but he divides the period into “early” (*zenki*) and “late” (*kōki*) phases, stretching nearly a millennium from the Song to the Qing dynasties. His “early” modern period starts in the tenth century with a checklist of transformations – such as the decline of the aristocracy, growth of the commercial economy, and rise of popular culture – that typically feature in taxonomies of global early modernity. So far as I can ascertain, Yang’s review was the first appearance of “early modern” as a translation of the Japanese term *kinsei*. The brackets around “early” disappeared, and eventually “early modern” became the standard translation of the term.

I will return to the use of *kinsei* in Japanese-language works shortly, but for now let us note that, as a term of periodization, it first appeared decades before Yang’s review and hence decades before the coining of “early modern Europe.” The first authors to translate *kinsei* into English as “early modern” surely meant the early part of the modern age rather than a distinct period of history. Nevertheless, their choice of words was significant. They detached

⁶ Yang, “Review of *Chūgoku kinseishi*.” Naitō’s son Kenkichi compiled *Chūgoku kinseishi* (1947) from students’ notes of lectures his father delivered between 1920 and 1925. Miyakawa, “Outline of the Naitō Hypothesis,” 535.

DAVID L. HOWELL

large chunks of East Asian history from the centuries before engagement with the West and posited this pre-Western time as the beginning of modernity. And they did this in China – never a darling of modernization theorists – at least as much as in Japan.

The first English-language book to feature “early modern Japan” in its title appeared in 1968, with the publication of *Studies in the Institutional History of Early Modern Japan*, edited by John W. Hall and Marius B. Jansen; five years more would pass before the appearance of the next example, *Deus Destroyed: The Image of Christianity in Early Modern Japan*, by George Elison (Jurgis Elisonas).⁷ For many years, authors of books on Japan in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries chose “Tokugawa” or “Edo” over “early modern” for their titles. I cannot say precisely when the tide turned – perhaps sometime around the publication in 1991 of volume 4 of the early iteration of the *Cambridge History of Japan*, entitled simply *Early Modern Japan*.⁸

Kinsei and the Language of Modernity

The Japanese term *kinsei* is now conventionally translated into English as “early modern.” Sure enough, the *kinsei* of scholars writing in Japanese today corresponds almost exactly to the “early modern” of Anglophone historians: it begins in the late sixteenth century and ends with the Meiji Restoration in 1868, at which point *kindai* or “modern” history begins. In fact, the practice of dividing Japanese history into *kinsei* and *kindai* periods is a relatively recent phenomenon. Historians writing after about the beginning of the twentieth century routinely used *kinsei* to refer to the Tokugawa era, but not until the 1950s did *kindai* become securely established as the term of choice to refer to the years after the Meiji Restoration. Moreover, this terminological division of labor is an arbitrary convention: dictionaries such as the authoritative *Nihon kokugo daijiten* define the terms in nearly identical language as referring to “the age close to the contemporary.”

Two reasons explain how the term *kinsei* came to refer to the Tokugawa period. The first is that throughout the Tokugawa era itself, people used *kinsei* to describe the time in which they lived. This sense of “recent times” or “nowadays” carried over into the Meiji period, though now one never hears it in ordinary conversation. The other reason is rooted in the practice of

⁷ Hall and Jansen, *Studies in the Institutional History*; Elison, *Deus Destroyed*.

⁸ Hall, *Early Modern Japan*. Hall’s introduction to this volume was the first direct discussion of the meaning of early modernity for Japanese studies. Wigen, “Mapping Early Modernity.”

Introduction: Genealogies of Japanese Early Modernity

writing history. Scholars active during the first decades of the twentieth century experimented with new forms of periodization and with new meanings for old terms, including *kinsei*. In the process of their experimentation, *kinsei* became a historical period rather than a generic term for the recent past.

Uchida Ginzō first turned *kinsei* into a historical period. He begins his *Nihon kinseishi*, published in 1903, with a brief discussion of the question of how to date the *kinsei* period.⁹ After making the point that one might reasonably start as early as the twelfth century or as late as the Meiji Restoration, he accepts “the general view” (*futsū no kenkai*) and settles on the early Tokugawa period – 1616, to be precise – as the most reasonable starting point. He chooses this date because to him it represents the *end* of a half century of developments of the sort that would make it onto any functionalist’s checklist of early modern attributes – the rise of commerce and industry, the spread of a money economy, urbanization, and intellectual vitality, all in the context of political chaos followed by unification. As he puts it, “There is adequate scholarly basis to date the onset of modernity (*kinsei*) from the point at which the changes of the transitional period had run their course.” As for the end of *kinsei*, Uchida thinks that 1853 – the year of Matthew Perry’s mission to Japan – is a good point; he follows that with a transitional period until the abolition of the Tokugawa domains in 1871, after which he dates the beginning of the contemporary age – *saikinsei* (the “most” *kinsei*). Although he begins by attributing many of Japan’s archetypically “early modern” changes to the period immediately preceding the Tokugawa, he planned in his history (he published only the first of a projected eleven volumes) to dwell on many of the same topics, including commerce, urbanization, and intellectual life.¹⁰

Insofar as he was writing decades before the invention of “early modernity” as a concept, Uchida’s *kinsei* necessarily means “modern” history, but not the sort of modernity that continuously updates itself to incorporate the present. In another survey of Tokugawa history, published in 1919, he explains that although it would not be wrong to include within *kinsei* the Meiji (1868–1912) and Taishō (1912–26) eras, it is better to distinguish the time since Perry’s arrival as *saikinsei*.¹¹ In any event, Uchida clearly rejected older styles of periodization once prevalent in Japanese historical writing, in which the distance over time from the present was the sole criterion – as

⁹ Uchida, *Nihon kinseishi*, 1–2.

¹⁰ See the outline contents of the full series, Uchida, *Nihon kinseishi*, v–vi.

¹¹ Uchida, *Kinsei no Nihon*, 9.

DAVID L. HOWELL

the previously common practice of dividing history into *jōko* (high antiquity), *chūko* (middle antiquity), and *kinko* (recent antiquity) suggests. Instead, Uchida uses *kinsei* as a label meant to capture the particular historical character of the period.¹²

Japanese historians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a cosmopolitan lot. They engaged deeply with European historiography, and their ideas attracted the attention of Western scholars. Many of the leading lights of the field, including Uchida, Hara Katsurō, the legal scholar Nakada Kaoru, and the medievalists Fukuda Tokuzō and Asakawa Kan'ichi, had studied in Europe or the United States; Hara, Fukuda, and particularly Asakawa – who spent most of his career at Yale University – published important works in European languages.¹³

The most important result of this engagement was the discovery of a Japanese Middle Ages (*chūsei*) characterized by European-style feudalism. For domestic Japanese purposes, as Thomas Keirstead shows, endowing Japan with a Western-style medieval age allowed scholars to assert a similar Western-style modernity as Japan's proper historical destiny.¹⁴ A comparable, if more drawn-out process, was at work in Western understandings of Japan. Inspired by Asakawa's work, Edwin O. Reischauer emphasizes Japan's unique non-European feudal experience in his consideration of the roots of Japan's successful modernization.¹⁵ As he puts it, "One cannot but compare Japanese success ... with the slow and painful efforts at westernization on the part of the other Asiatic peoples, who for the most part had had longer and often much closer contacts with Western civilization, but lacked the feudal background."¹⁶

During the half century between the publication of Uchida's book and the first appearance of "early modern Japan" in English, *kinsei* steadily gained acceptance as the standard term to describe the Tokugawa period.¹⁷ For decades, no consensus prevailed on how the term *kinsei* ought to be expressed in English-language histories of Japan. However, even authors who translated *kinsei* as "modern" in their footnotes refrained from calling the Tokugawa period modern in their texts, suggesting that the Tokugawa era has never been "modern" the way that Japan after the Meiji Restoration was. To take

¹² Sakamoto, "Edo jidai o 'kinsei' to iu koto."

¹³ Keirstead, "Inventing Medieval Japan."

¹⁴ Keirstead, "Inventing Medieval Japan."

¹⁵ Friday, "Futile Paradigm." Asakawa lays out his argument for Japanese feudalism in "Some Aspects of Japanese Feudal Institutions."

¹⁶ Reischauer, "Japanese Feudalism," 46.

¹⁷ Howell, "Nihon kinseishi."

Introduction: Genealogies of Japanese Early Modernity

just one example of many, Hall referred in 1955 to “early modern culture” and “modern castle towns” in his footnotes, even while clearly excluding the Tokugawa era from modernity in the text.¹⁸ Eventually, Anglophone scholars sidestepped the problem of direct translation and rendered *kinsei* as “Tokugawa.”¹⁹

What about “*kindai*”? According to Yanabu Akira, the word began appearing regularly as a translation of “modern” around 1890.²⁰ Before that, dictionaries commonly but not universally rendered “modern” as *kinsei*.²¹ For the next half century, *kindai* appeared occasionally as a term of historical periodization, but writers more commonly used it in an abstract sense, along the lines of the English “modernity.” *Kindai* was, like “modernity,” difficult to define precisely, yet it was freighted with values, positive and negative, in a way that *kinsei* tended not to be.²² It figures that when a group of intellectuals gathered in 1910 to consider the character of the “modern man,” and another panel convened in 1942 to discuss “overcoming modernity,” *kindai* rather than *kinsei* was the object of their inquiries.²³

For a few years in the early postwar period scholars continued to rely on *kinsei* and *saikinsei* to periodize modern history but used *kindai* in adjectival form. Yanabu gives the example of Ienaga Saburō’s *Shin Nihonshi* (1949), which characterizes the period since the Meiji Restoration as *saikinsei* but includes chapters on the birth of “modern Japan” (*kindai Nihon*) and the emergence of “modern industry” (*kindai sangyō*).²⁴ Before long, however, *kindai* entirely supplanted *saikinsei* to describe Japanese history since the Meiji Restoration. The final example of *saikinsei* that I have found is in a history of Tokyo’s Nerima ward, published in 1957.²⁵

By the time the first postwar edition of the *Iwanami kōza: Nihon rekishi* series appeared in the early 1960s, it had become hard to imagine calling modern history anything but *kindai*. In an essay on periodization produced for that series, Tōyama Shigeki argues that, thanks to the widespread acceptance

¹⁸ Hall, “Castle Town”: *kinsei* as “early modern” (46 n30, 54 n53), *kinsei* as “modern” (43 n21).

¹⁹ For example, Smith, “Landlords and Rural Capitalists”: *kinsei* as “Tokugawa” (166 n8, 169 n19, 171 n30, 179 n59); *kinsei* as “modern” (169 n25).

²⁰ Yanabu, *Hon’yakugo*, 43–64.

²¹ See Yanabu, *Hon’yakugo*, 56–57, for a list of dictionary entries from 1862 to 1911.

²² On the evolution of the nuances attached to the word “modern” in European languages, see Seed, “Early Modernity.”

²³ Yanabu, *Hon’yakugo*, 43, citing “Kindaijin to wa nanzo ya,” *Bunshō sekai*, July 1910, and “Kindai no chōkoku,” *Bungakukai*, September and October 1942.

²⁴ Yanabu, *Hon’yakugo*, 53–54.

²⁵ Tōkyō-to Nerima-ku, *Nerima-ku shi*. *Saikinsei* in this work refers to the period from 1868 to 1945; the postwar years are described as *gensei*, or “present conditions.”

DAVID L. HOWELL

of historical materialism, it had become a matter of “common sense” among historians to collapse the seven centuries of warrior rule into a single medieval/feudal (*chūsei/hōken*) age, followed by the modern (*kindai*) era from the Meiji Restoration to the present.²⁶ Tōyama’s “common sense,” which tossed out *kinsei* entirely, was shared neither by the editors of the Iwanami series, who grouped its four Tokugawa volumes as *kinsei*, nor indeed by specialists in Tokugawa history – among whom Marxists dominated – who continued to use *kinsei*. Tōyama’s invocation of his idiosyncratic common sense was an attempt to relegate the Tokugawa once and for all to premodernity, and its failure settled the issue of periodization. The next iteration of the Iwanami series, published in the mid-1970s, included an essay on periodization by another committed Marxist historian, Araki Moriaki, but his contribution, which addressed debates of concern only to materialists, did not consider the labeling of broad epochs at all.²⁷

Early Modern in Any Language

The Tokugawa period became *kinsei* at the beginning of the twentieth century, and it has remained *kinsei* ever since, through many changes in historians’ understandings of the era’s character. As a term of periodization, *kinsei* has gone from doing modernity’s work to doing early modernity’s. The seeds of its transformation were there from the beginning, as we see in the convention of ending *kinsei* at the Meiji Restoration and following it with something else – *saikinsei* or *kindai* – more suited to renewing itself to embrace the present. Perhaps it would be sneaky to argue that *kinsei* was destined to be “early modern” even before the idea of “early modernity” had been invented in European historiography. But we cannot disqualify it from being “early modern” just because it was not so from the outset.

The “early modern” destiny of the Tokugawa period is revealed in the contrast with China. As we have seen, the earliest references in English to “early modern” East Asia come from works on China, which reflects Naitō Torajirō’s influence on the field. According to Sakamoto Shōzō, Uchida Ginzō profoundly influenced Naitō.²⁸ Indeed, his influence is evident as early as 1914, when Naitō argued that *kinsei* began in China in the Song dynasty, for that was when absolutism, the rise of commoners, and the

²⁶ Tōyama and Nagahara, “Jidai kubun ron,” 170. Tōyama is credited as the author of the section under discussion here. See also Yanabu, *Hon’yakugo*, 58.

²⁷ Araki, “Hōsoku ninshiki.”

²⁸ Sakamoto, “Edo jidai o ‘kinsei’ to iu koto,” 114 n15.

Introduction: Genealogies of Japanese Early Modernity

emergence of a new culture changed Chinese society. This transformation predated but corresponded to the *kinsei* of Europe, “when the power of ordinary people increased, the discovery of new lands led to economic changes, and social organization changed as well,” and of Japan, where “the root structures of society gradually changed,” starting as early perhaps as the Kamakura period but in any case no later than the end of the Ashikaga.²⁹

In 1955, Miyakawa Hisayuki published in English a sympathetic introduction to the work of Naitō and his principal successor in the so-called Kyoto school of Sinology, Miyazaki Ichisada. Naitō’s view of “Chinese history itself [as] the norm of world history” inspired Miyazaki to write a long article on “The Renaissance in the Orient and in the Occident,” in which “he compared the early Sung period, the beginning of modern China, with the Renaissance, the beginning of modern Europe.”³⁰ The “modern” in the following quote and elsewhere is Miyakawa’s rendering of *kinsei*, but it actually reads a lot like a functionalist definition of early modernity. To see it, replace “modern” with “early modern” and “post-modern” with “modern,” in this summary of Miyazaki’s *Tōyōteki kinsei* (1950):

There are scholars who are willing to accept the fact of the important transition from T’ang to Sung but who reject the idea that the Sung is the beginning of the modern period. They are unaware of the universal criteria of modernity which a study of European history suggests; they focus on a few aspects and assert that the modern period in Europe begins with the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism and, since China did not see such developments under the Sung, they deny its modernity. But China had both a renaissance and a reformation though it had neither a French revolution nor an industrial revolution. The latter are characteristic of post-modern (*sai-kinsei*) rather than of modern Europe....

Developments in post-modern Europe have left Asia behind, but the modern periods of Europe and China are parallel and comparable.³¹

Nevertheless, in English-language scholarship on Chinese history, this usage of *kinsei* (whether rendered as “modern” or “early modern”) did not take hold. This may reflect *kinsei*’s toxicity in some Japanese academic circles, for

²⁹ Naitō, *Shina ron*, 7–9. According to Kishimoto, *Higashi Ajia no “kinsei,”* 1–2, Naitō was the first author to think systematically about the meaning of *kinsei* as a term of periodization in Chinese history.

³⁰ Miyakawa, “Outline of the Naitō Hypothesis,” 542, 545; Miyazaki, “Tōyō no runesansu.” The translation of the article’s title is Miyakawa’s.

³¹ Miyakawa, “Outline of the Naitō Hypothesis,” 546, summarizing Miyazaki Ichisada, *Tōyōteki kinsei* (Kyōiku Taimususha, 1950).

DAVID L. HOWELL

its use identified one with Naitō's Kyoto school, which opposed the Marxist history of the so-called Tokyo school, whose members saw the Song and succeeding dynasties as a feudal (*hōken*) or medieval (*chūsei*) age.³² During the last decade or so, scholars of China have increasingly adopted the language of early modernity, but the practice of referring to the Ming and Qing dynasties as “late imperial” remains widespread.

The genealogies of early modernity in Japan are two: the translation of the term *kinsei* into English, and the adoption of the phrase “early modern” from European history. In fact, however, despite their separate origins, the two strands have been intertwined for quite some time; *kinsei* in Japanese evolved from its early twentieth-century roots to denote just the sort of placeholder period between the high Middle Ages and the onset of true (read: capitalist) modernity that the term “early modernity” originally suggested in English. *Kinsei*/early modern China lasted for centuries – from the Song until the Qing – while Korea was (until very recently) never *kinsei*/early modern at all because, thanks to the legacy of colonial-era Japanese scholarship, the country was seen as hopelessly stuck in feudal darkness until Japanese colonialism dragged it into the modern world.³³

Although *kinsei* and “early modern” evolved as terms of historical periodization independently, they did so in response to the historiographical demands of the same functionalist paradigms. It is just that the Japanese started doing it first. Accordingly, early modernity as a period is older in East Asian historiography (i.e. Japanese scholarship on Japan and China) than it is in European historiography. In that sense, we East Asianists can tell our colleagues in Renaissance-Reformation history to keep their paws off our historical era. Early modernity is ours!

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³² Kishimoto, *Higashi Ajia no “kinsei,”* 2–3.

³³ On the legacy of Japanese colonial scholarship, see Pai, *Constructing “Korean” Origins*, and Palais, “Search for Korean Uniqueness.”