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Edited by
Ainslie T. Embree and Carol Gluck



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FIVE MYTHS ABOUT EARLY MODERN JAPAN

Henry D. Smith, II

The story line is a familiar one. Japan in the Tokugawa period was a small country, isolated from the rest of the world under the despotic and oppressive rule of a feudal lord known as the shogun, and hierarchically divided into the four separate classes of samurai, peasant, artisan, and merchant. Then in 1853 Commodore Matthew Perry arrived to open Japan, which responded by modernizing into a strong and prosperous modern nation-state.

This is of course a mythology, but like all mythologies it is remarkably durable, and continues to appear in only modified guise in most nonspecialist characterizations of early modern Japan. And like most mythologies, it is by no means wholly incongruent with current scholarly opinion; indeed, many of the issues that I present here as “myths” continue to be hotly debated among historians. Still, the extreme version offered above would be seen today as hopelessly one-sided. It is a version of the past that has its origins in the nineteenth century, and although it may smack of Western bias, it has in fact been promoted vigorously by many Japanese themselves, and across a wide political spectrum. Those who supported the Meiji state certainly favored such a negative estimation of the ancien regime, but so did the Marxist opponents of the twentieth-century Japanese state who saw Meiji as perpetuating the worst features of the Tokugawa order.

To dissect this mythology, let me separate out five elements in the above characterization of Tokugawa Japan as a way of placing it more effectively in the history of the West and the world.

MYTH #1: "Japan is a small country." This a useful proposition to discuss at the start of any introductory course on Japan. The correct response of course is, "it all depends." In land area, Japan is indeed small relative to the three neighbors which have had a major impact on its history at various times: China since ancient times, Russia since the later eighteenth century, and the United States since the early nineteenth century. But when compared to Korea (too often forgotten in such comparisons by Japanese themselves) or to the nation-states of Western Europe (which for reasons outlined in the next section is perhaps the best comparative framework for the early modern period), then Japan is about normal size. In terms of today's national boundaries, it is two-thirds the size of France, three-quarters that of Spain, about the same size as Germany, roughly one-quarter larger than Italy or the British Isles, and three-quarters bigger than the Korean Peninsula.

But when Japanese today claim, as they have been increasingly prone to do since the nineteenth century, that theirs is a "small" country, they more often mean that it is *semai*, densely populated and cramped for space. In the contemporary world, Japan is indeed densely populated: at 850 people per square mile, only Holland (952) and Belgium (842) are in the same league in Europe, although in an Asian context there are even denser nations, such as Bangladesh (2028), Taiwan (1478), or South Korea (1134).¹ And of course, as is always stressed, much of Japan's land area is mountainous ("only 16 percent arable" is a common formula) and inhospitable to habitation.

What about early modern times, however, when the population was only one-fourth what it is today, and far less heavily concentrated in crowded cities? Even then, it was still a dense country by comparison either with its Asian neighbors or with European nations. In about 1700, for example, Japan was about twice as densely populated as France or the British Isles. This means of course that in absolute population size as well, early modern Japan was a very large country, its 30 million people making it larger than any European nation in 1700, including France (22 million) and Russia (20 million).²

On a world scale, then, early modern Japan was a "small country" only in relation to its great historical neighbor China, the nation that rightfully continued to be the cornerstone of Japan's larger perception of "the world." The Indian subcontinent was much larger in population, but was not under a unified state. Russia, which emerged as the first great outside threat to Japan

in the eighteenth century, was far larger in area but smaller in population, most of it a great distance away. Within a European framework, Japan was large in both area and population.

MYTH #2: "Tokugawa Japan was a feudal society." This is the most complex and intriguing issue for placing Japan in world history. In teaching about feudalism, it is necessary first to deal with the popular sense of "feudal," which whether in English or Japanese (as *hokenteki*) tends to mean anything that is old-fashioned, authoritarian, and hierarchical. It is what teenagers call their parents, akin to "medieval" or "primitive." It is necessary to put to one side this colloquial sense of the term before approaching feudalism as an analytical concept of historical change.

Feudalism as a tool of historical analysis has a complex history, and its meaning for Japan has been widely debated.³ Without going into the details, however, it seems fair to say that most historians today would agree that if "feudalism" is defined such that it is more than a local phenomenon of western Europe, but less than a historical stage through which all societies must pass (as in most Marxist schemes), then the one non-European society that indisputably had a feudal period was Japan.⁴ No other candidate comes nearly as close, and none of Japan's East Asian neighbors is even a candidate (notwithstanding the voluminous literature on Chinese feudalism).

The problem, however, is one of timing. All agree that Japan reached the stage of "high feudalism" in the period from the late fifteenth to the early sixteenth century, when central authority was minimal and the nation divided into territories under the rule of military lords known as daimyo, each ruling through bands of vassal warriors who gave their loyalty in return for landed fiefs. In the decades that followed, however, the country was reunified and a new central regime finally established under the Tokugawa line after 1600. It fell short of total unification, however, with upward of three hundred lords continuing to rule their own fiefs directly, and reciprocal loyalty to the shogun the continuing basis of control.

Many modern Japanese historians, working under the influence of Marxist theories of stage development, have seen the creation of the Tokugawa regime as a freezing of earlier feudal patterns, or even as a "refeudalization" after the defeat of embryonic trends toward capitalism and the absolutist state. American historians of Japan have tended rather to mobilize the oxymoronic concept of "centralized feudalism." Today most would agree that such efforts to preserve the concept of feudalism simply undercut

the comparative leverage that the concept was designed to allow, since no European society was ever "refeudalized" or "frozen" for over two centuries past its feudal peak.

Unfortunately, no good alternative paradigm has yet emerged to replace feudalism as a comparative concept, but the most persuasive tool these days is an old one—the state. However "feudal" the Tokugawa regime may have appeared at the start, by the early nineteenth century it indisputably had many of the marks of a European state. Control over the daimyo was efficient and consistent, as reflected by the remarkable uniformity of methods of taxation and administration of justice among the domains. To be sure, the Tokugawa state was not "absolutist" in any European sense: there was no national army, no uniform national currency, no state bureaucracy extending to the local level. If one defines the state in terms of monopolization of the means of coercion, however, the Tokugawa regime was very state-like.⁵ The one critical contrast with the states of early modern Europe was the absence of the one imperative that most drove the engine of absolutism: foreign war. Japan, in other words, was distinguished not by being feudal, but by being peaceful—an attribute that made it more Asian than European.

MYTH #3: "The Tokugawa regime was a police state." Japan may have been peaceful abroad, but what about at home? The characterization of Japan as a kind of police state appears in many of the first Western accounts of Japan in the nineteenth century, which emphasized in particular the use of spies by the Tokugawa regime—a reference to the censors, or *metsuke*, who made sure that both domain and *bakufu* officials stayed in line. Later Japanese and Western scholarship has rather devoted attention to the heavy levels of surplus extracted from the peasantry, which was often reduced to poverty and driven to revolt. There is no doubt that Japan was autocratically ruled by the samurai class, and that justice was severe. But we also have the testimony of European observers, both at the beginning and end of the era, that justice was also leveled equally, and was rarely arbitrary. Punishments were harsh and often cruel, but they were never inflicted before large and leering public crowds as in early modern Europe.

More generally, it might be proposed that the Tokugawa state was relatively passive in its exercise of coercive authority. Both in villages and cities, most administration was left to local autonomous units. To be sure, it was autonomy only at the indulgence of the state, and in no sense true self-government. Still, the state

was content for the most part not to interfere. In the techniques of administration as well, the "feudal" Tokugawa regime favored checks and balances rather than overt coercion. The entire national system of daimyo domains was in fact an intricately balanced network of power, further held together by the requirement of "alternate attendance" (*sankin kōtai*) that obliged every daimyo to live in alternate years in Edo, the capital. Many official posts were held in tandem, with two officials rotating every year or half-year to obviate entrenched corruption. Responsibility was imposed on groups, and punishment for individual crimes was suffered by the group as a whole. Such techniques were common in China as well.

These notions of collective responsibility were very different from the situation in western Europe, where the state was obliged to carve out its coercive realm in the face of a growing sense of absolute property rights and individual political rights. The levels of violence to which European societies were subjected in this confrontation were probably much higher than in Japan or other East Asian societies of the seventeenth or eighteenth century. So was Japan a police state? Well-policed to be sure, and oppressive. But it was relatively even-handed oppression, and almost never despotic. Much depends on one's relative valuation of the private individual versus the community.

MYTH #4: "Tokugawa Japan was divided into four separate classes." This formula has been recited so many times that it will take a long time to overcome it. The notion is flawed in two ways. First, the division was not into socioeconomic "classes," but rather into what are better called "estates," groupings by occupation. Second, it was an ideal formula, borrowed from Chinese Neo-Confucian doctrine, that never really fit the reality of Japan (or even of China, for that matter). The basic division in Tokugawa Japan was between samurai and nonsamurai, but even here the distinction was often blurred, since mobility across the line increased with time. Moreover, the samurai estate encompassed a wide range of socioeconomic stratification, from the daimyo aristocracy on down to rowdy foot soldiers whose lot in life was little better than common coolies. It is often asserted that a samurai could cut down with impunity any commoner who insulted him. This was simply not true: any samurai exercising the right in question would be obliged to provide elaborate justification for the act, and as often as not suffer punishment for its commission.

The nonsamurai estates were similarly stratified, and the lines between them never really enforced. The primary restriction was

that of residence, since farmers were in theory forbidden from moving to the cities. This was never enforced except in the most futile and sporadic ways, and mobility between city and country was rapid and increasing throughout the period. Technically, land was inalienable, but in practice land was inherited, traded, and marketed (albeit under legal constraints).

None of this is to deny that Tokugawa society was elaborately differentiated—but so were all premodern societies. A person's status and occupation were immediately apparent from appearance, with complex rules of dress and hair style. It is often alleged that such things were minutely prescribed by law, but this is incorrect: *bakufu* regulations were proscriptions rather than prescriptions, rules not about what one should wear but about what one should **not** wear. These proscriptions were rarely obeyed (and hence frequently repeated), and at any rate were far less important than the endless customary rules that emerged spontaneously in a highly status-conscious society, particularly in the cities where people constantly encountered strangers.

A final misleading feature of the "four-class" formula is the valuation implied by the hierarchy, with peasants coming just after the samurai elite, and merchants at the very bottom. It is important to remember that the hierarchy was not one of people, but of function: it was not peasants above merchants, but farming above trade. As the British historian G.B. Sansom nicely summed up the plight of peasants, Tokugawa statesmen "thought highly of agriculture, but not of agriculturalists."⁶ As for merchants, they were far less denigrated as a group than the formula implies. The earliest elite merchants in Tokugawa cities were of samurai origin, and many merchant families maintained house codes and customs that closely paralleled those of samurai. Contempt for trade was far less deeply rooted in the Japanese elite than in the Chinese gentry class (and even there it was less virulent than often depicted). Rather, the relationship between samurai and merchant should be seen, as anthropologist William Kelly has argued, as one of "essential mutualism," each depending on the other and acutely aware of their reciprocal dependency.⁷

For proof of the inadequacy of the four-class stereotype, one need only look to the first years of the Meiji period, when all limitations of occupational estate were dropped and the only group to protest was a small minority of the samurai. At the same time, ex-samurai were even more numerous than merchants among the leading entrepreneurs of Meiji; so much for their contempt of trade.

MYTH #5: "Tokugawa Japan isolated itself from the rest of the world for over two centuries." This is in many ways the most pernicious of all the myths about early modern Japan. Although the Eurocentric quality of the formulation is immediately apparent, it has in fact been sustained by the Japanese themselves as much as by Westerners. The standard cliché is "self-imposed isolation," and it often goes under the Japanese term *sakoku*, translated as "closed country." This is the term, for example, applied to the series of edicts of 1633–39 that excluded the Catholic nations of Spain and Portugal from trade with Japan and forbade Japanese from traveling abroad. In the conventional historiography, Japan is seen as retreating into an isolationist shell, like a hermit crab, thereby shutting itself off from all the progressive influences available from Europe.

This whole picture has been completely revised in English-language scholarship by the work of Ronald Toby, who argues that what has been called "isolation" was in large part a restoration of normal relations by Japan with the two neighbors that had always been most important to it, China and Korea.⁸ Part of the process, to be sure, involved excluding the Catholic nations of the West, but this was largely a political measure aimed at controlling the threat of aggressive and disruptive Westerners. A few simple points should be remembered. First, the concept of "isolation" or "closing" never appeared in either the minds or the words of the Tokugawa rulers. The term *sakoku* made its first appearance, rather, in the early nineteenth century in a Japanese translation of an essay by Engelbert Kaempfer, a German doctor who traveled to Japan in 1690–92 and left a remarkable description of the country. The title (too long to quote here in its entirety) begins "An Enquiry, whether it be conducive for the good of the Japanese Empire, to keep it shut up, as it is now, and not to suffer its inhabitants to have any Commerce with foreign nations, either at home or abroad."⁹ The real irony is that Kaempfer's answer to the question posed in the title was a resounding "Yes!" He had nothing but admiration for the Japanese for avoiding the kind of foreign entanglements that led only to the ceaseless hatred and bloodshed that he had observed firsthand in mid-seventeenth-century Europe. Kaempfer's essay remains today one of the most remarkably perceptive accounts of Tokugawa Japan available, and is essential reading for anyone interested in the period.

But was Japan in fact all that isolated? Consider the fact that Japanese foreign trade actually increased somewhat in the wake of the alleged "closing" of the country, and continued to flourish

until the end of the seventeenth century.¹⁰ The eventual reduction of trade after 1715 was the result not of any isolationist impulse, but rather of a bullionist belief in the need to preserve the nation's precious metals for the minting of new coins rather than the payment for exports. At the same time, the cultural impact of the trade with the Dutch and Chinese at Nagasaki continued to increase. In 1721, just as total trade was being reduced, the shogun Yoshimune lifted the import ban on Chinese translations of Western books as long as they did not deal with Christianity. This marked the beginning of what by the end of the century would become a flourishing movement in Western Learning, first by way of Chinese translations and then through original Dutch texts that Japanese scholars laboriously learned to read. This Western knowledge, however imperfectly understood, had a tremendous leavening effect in Japanese intellectual life.

Stock descriptions of Tokugawa Japan depict the continuing trade through Nagasaki as a minor exception to an isolationist policy, seeing it as a "tiny loophole" or a "crack in the door." I prefer the metaphor of a relay or an "antenna" by means of which Japan received a continual flow of knowledge and information from both China and the West, as well as countless cultural objects that worked their own ways of change. It is impossible to tell the story of Tokugawa art, for example, without reference to the transformations wrought by continuing input from both Chinese paintings and Western copperplate prints. The highly developed internal network of communications in Japan by way of the *sankin kōtai* further insured that new knowledge spread rapidly to even the most remote castle towns.

Elsewhere in this volume, William Rowe has made a similar point about China, arguing that the "much-vaunted isolationism" of this era was largely limited to paper edicts, and that China's basic "attitude toward the outside world in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was anything but passive and defensive." The Japanese in the same period were undeniably more restrictive than the Chinese, effectively prohibiting any Japanese from traveling abroad. But they participated in the same East Asian world order, which was "isolationist" only in comparison to the aggressive expansionism of Western Europe. We are finally brought back to the matter of war and peace. The acceptance of orderly hierarchical relations among the nations of East Asia was basically a policy of peaceful coexistence rather than isolationism. It was a state of affairs that Europe should perhaps have envied rather than challenged.

NOTES

1. The figures are for 1991, from *The World Almanac and Book of Facts 1988* (New York: Pharos Books, 1992).

2. These figures are from Colin McEvedy and Richard Jones, *Atlas of World Population History* (New York: Facts on File, 1978), and as with all premodern population figures should be taken only as rough estimates.

3. The best introduction to the issue is Peter Duus, *Feudalism in Japan* (New York: Knopf, 1969). See also Joseph Strayer, "The Tokugawa Period and Japanese Feudalism" and John W. Hall, "Feudalism in Japan—A Reassessment," in *Studies in the Institutional History of Early Modern Japan*, ed. John W. Hall and Marius B. Jansen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 3–51.

4. I find the most persuasive proponent of this view to be the British Marxist historian Perry Anderson, in his thoughtful discussion in *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso, 1979), pp. 411–61.

5. For a recent argument along these lines, see James White, "State Growth and Popular Protest in Tokugawa Japan," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 14 (Winter 1988): 1–25.

6. George B. Sansom, *Japan: A Short Cultural History* (New York: Appleton, Century, Crofts, 1962), p. 465.

7. William W. Kelly, *Deference and Defiance in Nineteenth-Century Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 5.

8. Ronald P. Toby, *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan: Asia in the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984; paper ed., Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991). See also Marius B. Jansen, *China in the Tokugawa World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992). For a useful short account of Toby's major arguments, see "Reopening the Question of Sakoku: Diplomacy in the Legitimation of the Tokugawa Bakufu," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 3 (Summer 1977): 323–63.

9. Engelbert Kaempfer, *The History of Japan, Together with a Description of the Kingdom of Siam, 1690–92*, trans. J.G. Scheuchzer (Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons, 1906), pp. 301–36.

10. Robert Innes, "The Door Ajar: Japan's Foreign Trade in the Seventeenth Century," Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1980.