

# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

### REVIEW ESSAY

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#### **Japanese History, Post-Japan**

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Jason Ānanda Josephson. *The Invention of Religion in Japan*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012. 408 pp. \$90 (cloth), \$30 (paper).

Hwansoo Ilmee Kim. *Empire of the Dharma: Korean and Japanese Buddhism, 1877–1912*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2012. 444 pp. \$50 (cloth).

Jung-Sun N. Han. *An Imperial Path to Modernity: Yoshino Sakuzō and a New Liberal Order in East Asia, 1905–1937*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2012. 244 pp. \$40 (cloth).

The three recent works on Japanese history discussed in this essay are connected only tenuously in terms of their subject matter: the construction of the category of “religion,” Buddhism in colonial Korea, and the evolution of liberalism in prewar Japan, respectively. What unites these studies is, rather, their approach. Highlighting the vital links between their subjects and other areas of the world, these studies yield a composite portrait of Japan as viewed through the transnational lens that now characterizes historical studies more generally.

It has been some two decades since the so-called transnational turn in historical studies. What exactly distinguishes the transnational from other supranational historiographical frameworks (such as global, world, comparative, or international) is still the subject of ongoing debate (Bayly, Eckert, Connelly, Hofmeyr, Kozol, and Seed 2006). But there is nevertheless a consensus that a sea change has taken place in historical studies that has permanently displaced the nation-state as the subject of historical narrative (Iriye 2012). Historians now focus on the movement of people, ideas, and objects across national borders. Similarly, attention to the geographical area of the nation-state has given way to other political spaces, such as empire, or

areas whose borders are defined not by politics but by culture or economics. So thoroughly has the transnational perspective permeated the field that it is now all but taken for granted.

The transnational turn coincided with the end of the Cold War, sometime between the late 1980s and early 1990s. Many have pointed out that the scholarly interest in global interconnectivity was directly related to the American-dominated geopolitics of the post-Cold War era. Indeed, the first concerted effort to implement the transnational paradigm began in American studies, with a historiographical trend known as “America in the world” (Ngai 2012).

The connection between post-Cold War politics and the transnational turn is especially interesting in the case of Japan studies. The robust American field of Japan studies that thrived in the postwar period was deeply implicated in America’s Cold War policy in East Asia (Koschmann 2003, 225–250). As America’s strategic foothold in the East Asian theater of the Cold War, Japan was subordinated to U.S. security policy and subsequently transformed into an engine of global capitalism. This political-economic transformation was accompanied by a historiographical one. American scholars remade Japan into the exemplary society of modernization theory. They presented Japan’s past as a narrative of indigenous national development toward industrial capitalism and liberal government that only temporarily digressed from the “normal” path by entering the Pacific War. This narrative of progress in Japan—the first non-Western nation to successfully modernize—was a powerful weapon in the ideological competition for the developing societies of the Third World. Though modernization theory itself had a relatively short shelf life, its narrative of national development remained the historiographical orthodoxy for decades. Even the challenge of the new social history (with its attention to gender, class, and race), which did not significantly register in Japan studies until the 1980s, failed to unseat this orthodox narrative.

Though durable, these received narratives of Japanese history are essentially a now-obsolete Cold War technology. The end of the Cold War brought with it an unraveling of the postwar Japanese order: a loss of Japan’s strategic purpose in global geopolitics; the bursting of the bubble followed by decades of no growth; the fracturing of Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) hegemony; and the passing of the Shōwa Emperor, which prompted widespread public soul searching about war responsibility and the costs of postwar affluence. As the narrative of national history lost relevance, the transnational perspective registered comparatively quickly in Japan studies (see, for example, Harootunian and Miyoshi 1993).

In the twenty years that have transpired, no single narrative has replaced that of the Japanese nation. Though the field is more properly characterized by postmodern hostility toward narrative, it is nevertheless possible to discern a composite picture of modern Japan in current historiography. The historical fact that Japan was the first non-Western nation to modernize remains central. But in the absence of nation-centered historiography, this fact serves less to affirm global modernity than to critique it. As a node of connection between Western-dominated global networks of power and the Japanese-dominated region in East Asia, modern Japan provides a site at which to clearly observe the processes of global modernity at work. For Japan not only redefined global modernity by inventing anew (not merely “importing”) ostensibly universal modern concepts like religion, literature, and liberalism. As the imperial power in East Asia, it also exported its own modern concepts to its colonial peripheries, where these concepts were, again, invented anew.

Jason Ānanda Josephson’s *Invention of Religion in Japan* offers a case in point. Theoretically sophisticated and intellectually ambitious, Josephson’s book challenges the long-held assumption that religion is a universal component of human experience and argues instead that the concept of “‘religion’ masks the globalization of particular Euro-American concerns, which have been presented as universal aspects of human experience” (3). With this claim, he follows a line of critique established by such theorists as Talal Asad and Daniel Dubuisson. *The Invention of Religion in Japan* adds to this literature by shifting the perspective to Japan. While scholars of religion have thus far focused on the Western construction of religion and its export to the non-West, Josephson shows that the Japanese had their own discursive categories for observing and defining Western traditions prior to the Meiji period. More importantly, Josephson refutes the view that such categories as “Japanese religion” were manufactured in the West and imposed on a passive Japan. As its title suggests, the book’s central argument is that *shūkyō*, the modern Japanese equivalent of “religion,” was a modern Japanese invention. As such, it is evidence of Japanese agency in the production of global modernity. Josephson thus makes two contributions, revising both our picture of modern Japan and our theoretical understanding of religion as a modern construct.

The key to *The Invention of Religion in Japan* lies in its identification of global politics as the primary field of religious discourse in Japan. The modern discourse on “religion” in Japan originated in references to religion found in diplomatic correspondence from the 1853 American

opening of Japan to Western trade. Understanding what the term “religion” meant and defining it in legal discourse was thus a political imperative arising directly from Japan’s incorporation into the global capitalist system. As Josephson shows through a sweeping survey of Japanese interactions with the West from the sixteenth century onward, the Japanese had developed native rhetorical strategies for defining and categorizing the spiritual traditions of the West. Josephson’s work is a skillful exercise in semiotic analysis, drawing on sources in Japanese, Chinese, Portuguese, French, German, Dutch, Norwegian, Spanish, and Italian, and it illuminates the role of the Japanese as observers of the West, not merely as objects of Western observation.

Of the many innovative formulations in *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, perhaps the most useful for historians of Japan is the notion of the “Shintō secular.” The problem of Shintō worship and the so-called emperor system in all aspects of modern Japan’s political and cultural life is one of the knottiest in Japanese historiography and has confounded even the ablest scholars. Those who have charted these waters have relied on an idealized Eurocentric model of secularity to argue that Japan’s modernization produced an incomplete separation of religion from the secular sphere. Josephson instead uses Shintō to retheorize the concept of secularity itself. By looking at the import of Western science and the simultaneous ban on Christianity in pre-Meiji Japan, Josephson illuminates the inherent connections between science and Christianity by showing how science had to be “de-Christianized” in order to be domesticated, a process that resulted in the creation of *kokugaku*, which Josephson renders as “National Science.” It was this pre-Meiji synthesis of Western science with the discourse of Japan’s native deities, Josephson argues, that later enabled the Meiji leadership to legally categorize Buddhism and Christianity as “religions,” while maintaining that Shintō was not a religion and was therefore compatible with the public secular sphere. In this way, Josephson uses the transnational approach not only to revise a long-standing problem in Japanese historiography but also to deconstruct hegemonic Western concepts.

*The Invention of Religion in Japan* closes with a provocative one-paragraph postscript on Japan’s export of the invented idea of religion to Korea. “What had originally been a Japanese tactic to deal with foreign powers,” Josephson writes, “had become a strategy in Korea to which the Koreans had to formulate a response in return” (262). Japan, now in the role of imperial center, imposed its own modern categories on its colonial periphery. This postscript is a tailor-made introduction to a discussion of Hwansoo Ilmee Kim’s *Empire of the Dharma*. While

Josephson emphasizes Japanese agency in the Western-dominated discourse of global modernity, Kim examines the transnational Korean-Japanese discourse on Buddhism to illuminate Korean agency in the Japanese empire. Conceptualizing Japan as an inventor and exporter of modernity adds to the composite picture of Japan emerging from the transnational approach. Kim's focus, however, is on Korean agency, and his study is more directly engaged with the national historiography of Korea. As Kim points out, Japanese colonialism left a bitter legacy that drives a fiercely nationalistic historiography in Korean scholarship. The transnational approach, in this case, challenges Korean nationalist scholarship by positing Korea as an example of "colonial modernity," or a modernity that grew out of the colonial experience. Suggesting that Korean modernity is intimately linked with Japanese colonialism, and that something positive did in fact emerge from the colonial experience, is one of Kim's important claims.

The subject of Kim's study is the Wŏnjong, a Korean Buddhist sect formed in 1908, which Kim calls "the first modern institution of Korean Buddhism, arriving after centuries of 'mountain Buddhism,' which had no institutional identity" (181). The Wŏnjong is infamous in Korean historiography as the traitorous sect that sought an alliance with the Japanese Sōtō Zen sect in 1910, after Japan's formal annexation of Korea. Kim states that the dominant nationalist historiography of Korea views Japanese Buddhist missionary activities in Korea strictly as imperialist aggression. The attempted Wŏnjong-Sōtō alliance, therefore, is remembered as a shameful betrayal of Korean nationalism. Kim uses a transnational conceptualization of Japanese-Korean Buddhism to add much-needed complexity and nuance to the reductive oppression-resistance binary of the dominant political narrative. Taking the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu as his main theoretical framework, Kim argues that Buddhists on both sides were motivated by a host of factors that cannot be reduced solely to politics, and that they were in fact genuinely religious. On the Japanese side, Buddhists were motivated not by imperial aggression but by intersectarian competition, which was in turn motivated by a religious imperative to propagate Buddhism. Korean Buddhists, similarly, sought Japanese support not to sell Korea out to imperial Japan, but to strengthen Korean Buddhism by linking it to the modernizing vanguard of Japanese Buddhism.

Kim contextualizes the 1908 birth of the Wŏnjong and the failed 1910 alliance near the end of a long narrative that begins in 1877, one year after Japan imposed the Ganghwa Treaty on Korea. The narrative ends in 1912, two years after the formal annexation of Korea, when the

1911 Temple Ordinance went into effect and permanently separated Korean and Japanese Buddhisms. During the interim, Kim argues, both Korean and Japanese Buddhisms enjoyed a degree of autonomy in Korea, and their interactions and competition during this time constitute a transnational Korean-Japanese Buddhist space in which the two sought each other out for the sake of strengthening Buddhism. In this context, the 1910 alliance was a failed opportunity for Buddhism, not a success for imperialism. In a brief concluding section, Kim judges the Korean Buddhists to have reaped greater benefits than their Japanese counterparts during this early colonial period, striking a blow against the rigid orthodoxy of nationalist Korean historiography.

The third book under consideration, Jung-Sun N. Han's *Imperial Path to Modernity*, shows yet one more way in which the transnational perspective has transformed a familiar fixture of Japanese national historiography. In this case, Han turns the transnational perspective on Taishō democracy, the liberal democratic movement of prewar Japan that centered on the Christian thinker Yoshino Sakuzō. As Han points out, the idea of Taishō democracy was a central feature of Cold War–era Japan studies that intended to identify prewar antecedents for the postwar efforts to democratize Japan. As with many conventions in postwar Japan studies, Taishō democracy is often seen as a promising but doomed phenomenon along the path of Japan's "normal" development.

Han begins to revise this staple of Japanese history by identifying liberalism as part of the Euro-American global imperialist system. Han sees liberalism, like Josephson sees religion, as one of several ideas that grew out of European experience that were represented as "globally applicable 'standards of civilization' or 'international laws' that acted to facilitate the 'imperialism of free trade' during the nineteenth century" (3). *An Imperial Path to Modernity*, like *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, thus looks at the Japanese domestication of an international concept that masks Euro-American power. Similarly, the result was not the imposition of a modern Western concept on a passive Japan, but rather the original invention of a modern concept in Japan—what Han calls the "new liberal project." As Han points out, the distinguishing features of classic liberalism—laissez-faire market economy, the sovereign individual, and natural rights—were concepts derived from European experience that had no counterparts in modern Japan, which viewed the state as a progressive agent and saw liberalism as "less a philosophy of liberation than a technology of governance" (8). Han also argues that the reception of liberalism in Japan has too often been interpreted solely in terms of the national

context, and she accordingly places it in Japan's imperial context. Finally, Han grounds this reception in class experience. Yoshino was a member of Japan's new middle class, which was created by the World War I boom and defined by a robust print culture. Han's complex transnational reframing of prewar Japanese liberalism breaks down the democratic–antidemocratic dichotomy of previous scholarship and finds continuities between Yoshino's thought and that of his more aggressively nationalistic disciple, Rōyama Masamichi.

As these three works show, the transnational perspective in historical studies has transformed our picture of Japan. The study of modern Japan is now more of a portrait than a narrative. In the current approach, Japan mediates between global modernity and a regional East Asian modernity. The emphasis is on the processes whereby power circulates and is reproduced throughout this interconnected system, in which Japan mediates between the global and the regional. This view is inherently critical of these systems. It sees the global network of international relations as a manifestation of particular Euro-American interests, and in turn sees the Japan-centered modernity in East Asia as a manifestation of Japanese interests. Throughout, modernity is something that does not simply travel, but must be made anew. As a mediator between two systems, Japan is both a subject and object of this critical perspective on global modernity, and this is arguably the value of Japan studies today.

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### **References**

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