

## Review of Vaporis, *Voices of Early Modern Japan*

Constantine N. Vaporis, *Voices of Early Modern Japan: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life during the Age of the Shoguns* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 2012) ISBN 978-0-313-39200-9.

*Voices of Early Modern Japan* is a well-designed and useful source collection that will, in more ways than one, aid instructors in preparing and conducting meaningful lectures and discussions on Japan's Tokugawa or Edo period (1600-1868).

The text's first strength lies in its breadth. The anthology is organized in seven thematic units (The Domestic Sphere, Material Life, The Political Sphere, Foreign Relations, Social and Economic Life, Recreational Life, and Religion and Morality), whose documents cover virtually the entire time span of the Tokugawa period, with the earliest example dating back to 1610 (the testament of merchant Shimai Sōshitsu, Section 26) and the latest composed in 1866 (a letter of apology from a violent farmer, Section 27). Technically, the anthology includes an even earlier example, Toyotomi Hideyoshi's 1588 "Sword Hunt" edict (Section 14), which set the stage for some of the most meaningful social policies of the Tokugawa; and a much later one, Yamakawa Kikue's recollections, published in 1943 but relaying memories of life in nineteenth-century Mito (Section 8).

Chronological breadth is not the only area in which this anthology excels; coverage of social spectrum is also comprehensive. The voices of early modern Japan that come to us through this collection are those of both the rulers and the ruled, of men and women, of samurai and commoners, of the inhabitants of the Japanese islands, and of foreign visitors. They speak to us by way of law codes and fiction, personal memoirs and letters, songs and population registers. Such an assortment successfully brings to light the discrepancies between theory and practice as well as between discourse and reality, enabling us to see, as Vaporis intends, "what kind of society Tokugawa Japan's rulers idealized and what the reality of it actually was" (p. xi). Take Section 4, for example: on the one hand we find the pedantic exhortations to female quietness and restraint of *The Greater Learning for Women*, an eighteenth-century manual written by a man, and on the other, the candid musings of Tadano Makuzu (1763-1825), a woman who professed to having jotted her *Solitary Thoughts* "without any sense of modesty or concern about being unduly outspoken" (p. 20). Just as enlightening is a comparison of the samurai ideals as expounded in Sections 35 (Hinatsu Shirōzaemon Shigetaka's treatise on archery and the martial arts, 1714) or 25 (two samurai brothers' bid to avenge the death of their father, 1828) versus the reality of a life defined more by debt and misery than by lofty military achievements (samurai Tani Tannai's 1751 request for a loan, Section 23).

Second, instructors can assign documents from this collection to dispel some of the most enduring misconceptions about Tokugawa Japan: that it was a "closed country," that the entire population was organized into four rigid social classes (samurai, farmers, artisans, and merchants), and that the samurai at the top of the ideal social pyramid were the paragons of virtue, honor, and loyalty. While Vaporis does use the contentious term *sakoku* (closed country) in the timeline (p. xlv), in the preface (p. xii), and in Section 17, he also

warns that *sakoku* is in fact a retroactively attached label, arguing that closing the borders was probably not the intention of the Tokugawa, and that trade with China and Korea actually picked up after the expulsion of the Portuguese (p. 98). Appropriately, the anthology provides ample evidence for the existence of lively contacts with the outside world *after* the issuing of the maritime restrictions in 1639 and *before* the arrival of Commodore Perry in 1853 – see for example Sections 10 (a Swedish doctor’s description of the Japanese home, 1791), 18 (the diary of a Korean official visiting Japan in 1719), and 20 (the report of an audience with the shogun by a German doctor at the service of the Dutch, 1692).

As far as the four classes are concerned, Vaporis tackles the issue head-on in the introduction (pp. xxiii-xxiv), warning that such “idealized conception” hardly squared with “social realities” (p. xxiii). Some of the sources included in *Voices of Early Modern Japan* support the notion that an *idealized* division of society in four neat groups did exist (for example Yamaga Sokō’s lamentations on the decline of samurai spirit and on the transgressions of “the three classes of the common people” in Section 22), but many more speak of “commoners” and “townspeople” (*chōnin*) rather than “artisans” and “merchants,” effectively debunking such artificial taxonomy (see document 2 in Section 14, document 2 in Section 5, document 1 in Section 16). One (Section 30) even sheds light on an otherwise unmentioned category of individuals, the outcastes. To be clear, questioning the validity of the all-too-convenient “four class” model is not the same as denying the Tokugawa’s obsession with the boundaries of status. A useful way to bring this obsession to light would be to focus on the many documents that tie one’s place in society with one’s appearance (acceptable garments, fabrics, colors). Sections 13 (Regulations for the Imperial Palace and the Court Nobility, 1615), 15 (village laws, 1640), 16 (regulations for townspeople, 1642 and 1711), and document 2 in Section 5 (prohibitions concerning clothing for Edo townsmen, 1719), for example, offer abundant food for thought in this respect and would make for a lively in-class discussion: who was allowed to wear what, and why? What does the need to issue such regulations suggest?

In my Pre-modern Japan course I spend a lot of time adjusting misconceptions about the samurai’s unassailable loyalty and their preternaturally immaculate character, and there is no shortage of documents from earlier periods that can be used to do so. *Voices of Early Modern Japan* offers similar opportunities for the Tokugawa era. Section 11, for example, details the fall of Osaka Castle in 1615, which can lead to a discussion of Tokugawa Ieyasu’s betrayal of the Toyotomi clan. Selections from the *Laws for the Military Houses* (1615 and 1635, Section 12) in the league of “avoid drinking parties and gaming amusements,” “practice frugality,” or “expel any of [the] retainers guilty of rebellion or murder” (p. 68) beg the question: why were such exhortations necessary? And why did they have to be re-issued periodically?

The notion that Tokugawa-era samurai were concerned with honor and loyalty is not incorrect per se, but needs to be contextualized: they were especially sensitive to such ideals because theirs was a day and age in which they no longer got to practice meaningful acts of violence. The prolonged peace turned a day job (warfare) into a forbidden fruit, a collective obsession, something that would be talked about and written about, but could not actually be acted upon. I suggest using documents like the samurai brothers’ request to avenge their father (Section 25) less as examples of “timeless” samurai values and more as examples of a time-specific trend on the part of the rulers toward the micromanagement of violence, social order, and public peace. As mentioned earlier, I would also read idealized projections of samurai life like the treatise on archery and the martial arts (1714, Section 35) or Yamaga Sokō’s *The Way of the Samurai* (mid- to late-seventeenth century, Section 22) against the

reality of debt and misery that is perfectly captured in Tani Tannai's 1751 loan request (Section 23). Incidentally, I wholeheartedly second Vaporis' suggestion to integrate his selections on samurai life with Katsu Kokichi's iconoclastic *Musui's Story: The Autobiography of a Tokugawa Samurai* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988) and/or with the poignant film *Twilight Samurai* (*Tasogare Seibei*; directed by Yamada Yōji, 2002) for a more comprehensive depiction of the daily life of low-rank samurai in the nineteenth century.

Vaporis' suggestions for further readings and recommendations for appropriate films bring me to the third and final way in which *Voices of Early Modern Japan* makes for an excellent reference collection: its practical approach and attention to pedagogical principles. The introduction (pp. xvii–xxix) treats the reader to a brief account of the Tokugawa era and to a concise summary of its historiographical ups and downs, from its characterization as a dark and feudal age in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the “Edo boom” of the 1980s (pp. xvii–xx). The next section, *Evaluating and Interpreting Primary Documents* (pp. xxxi–xli), not only advises students on how to approach and read primary sources, but also describes in fascinating detail and with the powerful support of visual reproductions what Tokugawa-period documents looked like (scrolls, bound books, one-page broadsheets), how they were created (either with brush and ink or with woodblocks), how they were read (top to bottom, right to left), and even what kind of paper was used and what measures were taken to fend off the attacks of the voracious paper worms (the documents were treated with persimmon juice). Chronologies of the main events in the early modern era, of the fifteen Tokugawa shoguns, and of the emperors who reigned at the time are also included, as well as a glossary and a series of short biographies of the main historical figures featured in the collection.

More importantly, each entry is presented in its historical context, with a brief introduction and a follow-up on the fate of the author(s) after the document was written or made public. A set of points for the students to keep in mind as they read, a series of questions and topics to consider after having read the document, suggestions for further readings, titles of relevant films, and even links to appropriate websites complete the picture, offering full guidance to the novices and great ideas even to the experts. Some of the recommendations extend beyond the field of Japanese history and provide general suggestions for comparative discussions that would be of great use even in a World History survey. To cite two examples among many, the 1815 document on marriage and dowry (Section 1) includes links to the Code of Hammurabi and to India's 1961 Dowry Prohibition Act; the 1615 and 1645 grooming standards for samurai (Section 6) are presented as the possible starting point for a discussion on the relation between politics and hairstyles that would also look at the hippies in 1960s US.

These are, in my opinion, the strengths of *Voices of Early Modern Japan*. At the same time, there are a few caveats. Because the anthology is organized topically and not chronologically, some caution must be exercised in assigning the selections of readings, particularly in light of the fact that students often tend to overlook the dates. For example, under Foreign Relations (Sections 17 through 21) we find documents from as early as 1635 to as late as 1825 – and the different historical contingencies behind each document ought to be kept in mind. In the aforementioned Section 4, the comparison between *The Greater Learning for Women* (1716) and Tadano Makuzu's reflections (1818), while enlightening, needs also to take into account the opportunities for women that had materialized in the one hundred years between the publication of the former and the penning of the latter.

A second caveat for those considering the adoption of this anthology has to do with a less abstract, more practical matter: its cost. At \$100, *Voices of Early Modern Japan* may

be well beyond the reach of many students and, I suspect, of a few instructors as well. Its beauty and elegance, inevitably, come at a price.

Last but not least, I would like to make two suggestions for possible amelioration. Should the publisher consider a paperback reprint and/or a revised edition, I would ask that they add a map of early modern Japan with its provinces and major cities. Given the book's general attention to detail (chronological tables, glossaries, biographies), the absence of a map is a bit puzzling; its addition would greatly enrich the volume from a pedagogical standpoint. Second, and this may require a bit more work, I would strongly recommend the inclusion of visual sources. Save for the calendar in Section 7, the documents featured in *Voices of Early Modern Japan* are exclusively text-based, which is unfortunate given the usefulness, charm, and availability of woodblock prints from this period (especially the nineteenth century). Their exclusion is a missed opportunity to educate the students on the challenges and joys of visual literacy, not to mention to grab their attention with the early modern antecedents of manga. For now, instructors wishing to consult exemplary historical analyses of late-Tokugawa woodblocks should look at the following: Smits, Gregory J., "Shaking Up Japan: Edo Society and the 1855 Catfish Picture Prints," *Journal of Social History* 39.4 (2006): 1045-77; and Steele, M. William, "Goemon's New World View" in *Alternative Narratives in Modern Japanese History* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003): 4-18.

For its few minor flaws, *Voices of Early Modern Japan* has a great many strengths. It is comprehensive, informative, innovative, and elegant. The collection's subtitle promises to open a door into "daily life during the age of the shoguns," and the parade of characters to which Vaporis gives a voice certainly delivers on this promise: not only do they open the door, they also entice the reader to walk right in and enjoy the show.

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