Tokugawa Intellectual History: State of the Field

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I

Tokugawa intellectual history has been called “one of the liveliest and most interesting” branches of the study of Japan in America. The claim was made by Samuel Yamashita in a spirited and accessible article, “Reading the New Tokugawa Intellectual Histories”. Yamashita’s essay surveyed publications between 1979 and 1992. In this sense, much of the ground for the present essay has already been covered. Yet even a modest attempt to update a survey of Tokugawa intellectual history remains a challenge. Of all fields, intellectual history seems to exhibit the broadest range of methods and approaches. The very concept of “intellectual history” differs radically among its practitioners. It ranges from conventional intellectual biography, through historical sociology in the grand Weberian manner, to postmodernist explorations of the relation of language to reality. The understanding of man in society that informs the field is also contested. Some writers adhere to a common-sense, “objectivist” approach; others see man as the bearer of values largely determined by or responsive to economic, social and political influences; yet others, as a being in quest of spiritual goals; and others, as the decentered participant in a linguistically constructed world with which their own relationship is at best problematic. This diversity means that scholars have tended not infrequently either to talk past each other, or to write virulently partisan, indeed sectarian, reviews of each others’ work.

The strength of Yamashita’s survey lies precisely in his attempt to encompass a very heterogeneous body of work within a broad overview. He set his subject, moreover, in the wider context of recent European and American thinking on intellectual history. He has, one might say, attempted an intellectual history of Tokugawa intellectual history. Yamashita found that the field was indeed burgeoning, for reasons that apply a fortiori to the present. He noted the revival of interest among Japanese scholars after a long post-war period of neglect, the publication in Japan of extensive series devoted to thought, and the vigor of American scholars, as expressed in a series of conferences. Against this background, Yamashita divided the scholarship of this period into four main “interpretive communities”, a concept derived from Stanley Fish. These communities are: the “modernization school”; the school of William Theodore de Bary; the “new intellectual historians”; and, though he writes of just one exemplar, “the postmodern theorists”. Yamashita’s own sympathies seemed to incline towards the last two mentioned. But he found both merit and demerit in each of the four

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2 The expression “objectivist” is used by Yamashita, ibid., 13.
3 Ibid., 4; for further discussion, see Janine Sawada, “Tokugawa Religious History: Studies in Western Languages, 1980-2000,” below.
“None”, he wrote emolliently, “is intrinsically closer to an imagined historical reality or inherently more truthful than any other. In fact, each of these strategies configures as well as disfigures the Tokugawa material”.  

Yamashita’s classification has a certain cogency, and can even be linked to the institutional setting of the field in the United States. He is above all concerned with method and intellectual pedigree. He is most instructive where, as with the “new intellectual historians”, he can link the method to the work of historians writing on Europe and America. At the same time, his article is also both provocative and eccentric. It has several weaknesses, which seem to derive partly at least from its author’s theoretical leanings. First, the modernization category is too inclusive. It incorporates historical sociology, like the now classic work of Robert Bellah with its explicit concern with the resources that predisposed Japan to rapid modernization. But, with less obvious justification, it includes a historian of education such as Richard Rubinger, together with highly focused monographs on particular historical figures. The principal exemplar in the latter category was Kate Nakai’s study of Arai Hakuseki’s political career, Shogunal Politics. This work, however, was, at most, incidentally and tangentially concerned with the causes of the Restoration, let alone the broader theme of modernization. Here, Yamashita seems to have been overly influenced by H.D. Harootunian’s ill-judged review of 1990, which charged Nakai with “rigid commitment to a normative course that had been supplied by modernization theory years ago”.

Rather few scholars balance high methodological sophistication with rigorous study of the primary sources for the period. All too often, there is an inverse relationship between theoretical bravura and textual thoroughness. Yamashita’s sympathies are confirmed by a perhaps unconscious betrayal of the standards that most empirically orientated scholars would accept as de rigueur. Writing of the work of Kate Nakai and of Bob T. Wakabayashi, he praises their method in startling terms.

Both should be congratulated for reading their sources in the original kanbun or bungotai form, for with the writings of leading Tokugawa thinkers now available in modern Japanese, it is tempting to use these more accessible and readable versions. Both also made good use of the relevant secondary literature in Japanese, and to their credit acknowledge their debts.

In a field where the original language is the very stuff on which interpretation is based, Yamashita’s wording suggests that it is especially laudable to consult the original texts. This implies expectations of scholarly practice that would be unacceptable in the intellectual history of other cultures. Yamashita does, it is true, allude to problems concerning accuracy of reading and translation when reporting the review literature on the work of the “new intellectual historians”. None the less, his sympathy with the theoreticians appears to incline him to sweep disciplined

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4 Yamashita, 46.
5 Robert N. Bellah, Tokugawa Religion: The Values of Pre-Industrial Japan (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1957).
9 Yamashita, 10-11.
linguistic understanding of primary source material under the carpet. 10

A further eccentricity was that the survey addressed only “American” scholarship. It is perhaps one thing to restrict such a survey to English language publications. Regrettably, few have ready access to the relevant scholarship written in other languages, such as German, French, Chinese or Russian. Nor would one wish to deny that America leads the way; outside Japan, the field is most vigorous in the United States. Nonetheless, a significant contribution is made by scholars writing in English outside that country. After all, the main scholarly journals in Japanese Studies are genuinely international. A book written by a Japanese for an English language readership may be reviewed in an American journal by a Dutch scholar also writing in English. Yamashita’s apparently self-imposed restriction means that his survey is incomplete and unbalanced. Oddly in a scholar sensitized to the subtleties of power, he seems to constitute his own hegemonic discourse, to indulge in what, facetiously to borrow the language of critical theory, might be called the “discursive exclusion of the heterogeneous”. 11 His survey omits a number of works of quiet but real scholarly value. Thus 1992 saw a reissue of W.J. Boot’s 1983 Leiden University doctoral dissertation, “The adoption and adaptation of Neo-Confucianism in Japan: the role of Fujiwara Seika and Hayashi Razan”. This “second version”, 12 though revised in some particulars, is not yet rewritten in book form; it retains longueurs in the form of excessively long passages of translation which, while they help establish the author’s bona fides as a researcher, make for hard reading. None the less, Boot’s work forms an admirable counterpoint in method and findings to Herman Ooms’s Tokugawa Ideology, reviewed by Yamashita. Boot scrupulously analyses the mainly kanbun primary documentation concerned with the early phases of the Neo-Confucian movement in the Tokugawa period. His work exhibits an exemplary and, indeed, timeless critical thoroughness. The scholarly community needs such works of caution and integrity, just as it needs the stimulus of works of abstraction and theory.

Omitted, too, from Yamashita’s survey were two books of non-American authorship that dealt with two of the most original and difficult Tokugawa thinkers, both influenced by Dutch studies, the materialist Miura Baien and the antinomian Andō Shōeki. The New Zealand scholar, Rosemary Mercer’s Deep Words: Miura Baien’s System of Natural Philosophy, a Translation and Philosophical Commentary, 13 follows a pattern common in the field: an introduction followed by translations from Baien’s work. What distinguishes this book is that, unusually in the field of Japanese intellectual history, Mercer is a professional western philosopher; she approaches Baien’s work with the critical rigor of that discipline. Toshinobu Yasunaga’s Ando Shoeki: Social and Ecological Philosopher in Eighteenth-century Japan 14 follows the same pattern.

10 While Yamashita does mention reviews critical of the “new intellectual historians” for inaccurate translation (Ibid., 34-35), he refrains from himself evaluating these criticisms.
Its strengths lie in a different direction. The author is familiar with the broad East Asian philosophical and religious tradition and is particularly persuasive on the influence of Zen Buddhism, together with Dutch learning, on Shōeki’s thought. Neither book is entirely successful. Mercer, as Peter Nosco pointed out in his review, while cautioning against philosophical comparisons between Baien and western philosophers, indulges in just that. Her claim that Baien’s category of “fineness” corresponds to a universal should be treated with great caution. Yasunaga’s book, on the other hand, lacks bibliography, index and macrons over the long vowels of romanized Japanese. Yet both books, eccentric to some degree like their subjects, have drawn attention to the creativity and variety of eighteenth-century Japanese thought.

These contributions to the field are worthy even of belated note. The present essay, however, is concerned largely with monograph and book-length work published in the mid to late 1990s, thus taking the story on from Yamashita’s article. It is influenced by, but attempts to adjust, his “interpretive communities”. A threefold division has been adopted, though it is not intended to suggest that the three categories are in any sense methodologically exclusive or pure. Yamashita’s “modernization” becomes historical sociology; the de Bary group is assimilated to a broader history of ideas; the “new intellectual historians” and “post-modernists” are grouped together. The approach is influenced by Yamashita, but remains that of a generalist uncommitted to any particular method. For the generalist may be well placed to spot excesses and shortcomings, to test the claims of the theoretically-inclined against sober empirical reality, and to point to themes that remain yet to be fruitfully explored.

Nor are these three categories exhaustive. The Canadian historian John S. Brownlee has continued his instructive survey of Japanese historical and political thought, which had already in 1991 touched on the secular and rational character of the historical thinking of Arai Hakuseki. In the first part of his 1997 monograph *Japanese Historians and the National Myths, 1600-1945: The Age of the Gods and Emperor Jinmu*, he devoted chapters successively to Hayashi Razan and Hayashi Gahō, the Dai Nihon shi, Arai Hakuseki and Yamagata Bantō, and to Date Chihiro. Much of his account is descriptive, but he also convincingly documents a growing spirit of “positivism” and a secular and rational approach to the past as it underlay and explained the political structures of the present. This rationality was, however, constrained by Confucian metaphysical thought and pitted against the demands of nationalism and its associated irrational myths. Nonetheless it provided the foundation for modern Japanese historiographical practice. In a quite different direction, Wai-ming Ng’s very recent book, *The I ching in Tokugawa Thought and Culture*.

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18 Ng Wai-ming, *The I Ching in Tokugawa Thought and Culture* (Association for Asian Studies and Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000).
is a survey of the diffusion of I ching studies in Tokugawa Japan. Its approach seems best described as bibliographical and cultural. It surveys the prodigious and varied Tokugawa period output of texts on this important work. Its main finding is to show how remarkably widely Japanese culture was penetrated at different levels by Chinese ideas on divination, cosmology, numerology and moral thought. Its broad scope means, however, that in no one field is Ng's discussion particularly profound. Rather, his book opens paths to further enquiry.

II

Historical sociology addresses society and its dominant traditions. However, it exploits much of the same material as intellectual history, is concerned with moral values, world view and ethos, and its findings are germane to intellectual history. The best-known example of this approach in the Tokugawa field is, of course, Robert Bellah's Tokugawa Religion.19 This seminal book looked at the value system of the Tokugawa period from the point of view of its contribution to Japan's modernization during and after the Meiji period. This concern reached a high tide during the sixties and seventies: to some extent, modernization has since receded in importance as its underlying assumption of the normative status of western culture has been exposed and questioned. None the less, two books published in the period under review may be discussed under this rubric: Eiko Ikegami's The Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan;20 and the slighter book by Eiji Takemura, The Perception of Work in Tokugawa Japan: a Study of Ishida Baigan and Ninomiya Sontoku. 21 Both these works explicitly take Robert Bellah's classic study as their point of departure.

Takemura is concerned in his short book with practical attitudes to work: he eschews what he calls the "sublime ideologies [such as Confucianism, which] remained for the most part the heritage of the intellectual few".22 Ishida Baigan and Ninomiya Sontoku, in his view, saw work both as social role play and as a mode of spiritual self-fulfilment. Takemura argues that through the teaching of these individuals "work was ideologized in depth and enriched with meaning". 23 They promoted not a submissive loyalty, but constructive planning, autonomy and even criticism of superiors. He is cautious over to what extent their teaching contributed directly to modernization, though he does argue that it "promoted economic change"24 and even "helped Japan's relatively smooth industrial transformation". 25 Yet both movements declined: the former into submissiveness and "common morality"; the latter to be highjacked by statist ideology. This is a readable introduction to the topic, but adds little fundamentally to the work of Bellah and others.

Eiko Ikegami's The Taming of the Samurai is on an altogether grander scale. It may well be the most widely noted book in the field in the period under review. The sweeping nature of its claims concerning the Japanese experience requires that, of

19 Bellah, Tokugawa Religion.
20 Eiko Ikegami, The Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the
21 Eiji Takemura, The Perception of Work in
22 Ibid., 199.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 23.

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21 Eiji Takemura, The Perception of Work in
22 Ibid., 199.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 23.

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all the work touched on in this essay, it be most carefully evaluated. Like Takemura’s book, it stands firmly and self-consciously in the tradition of Robert Bellah’s Tokugawa Religion. Indeed, Ikegami writes of “sharing many of Bellah’s interests and questions concerning Japanese culture”.26 As her title suggests, she is interested in the “resources” that traditional Japanese culture brought to the modern world. Writing nearly four decades after Bellah, however, Ikegami could draw on a vastly greater volume of analysis of Japan’s cultural inheritance. As a native speaker of Japanese, moreover, she controlled a body of historical scholarship in a fashion denied Bellah himself. Like Bellah, she is explicitly concerned with the values of the warrior estate. However, she adopts a diachronic, historical method that sets her work off from what she sees as Bellah’s “static” and “functionalist” approach.27 She is sensitive to the dynamic development of Japanese history, to the multi-layered character of the Japanese cultural tradition, and particularly to the effect on samurai of state formation in the early modern period.

Bellah had focussed on inner-worldly mysticism and its associated asceticism as a Japanese counterpart to Weber’s “Protestant ethic”. Ikegami, by contrast, builds her analysis around what she terms “honorific individualism”. A major thesis of her book is that early Japanese notions of honor were basically individualist, focused on the one-to-one combat of the twelfth century. In late medieval times, honor had connoted “violence, autonomy, individuality, and dignity”.28 This form of honor was, however, incompatible with the requirements of order in Japan’s early modern state. Ikegami is particularly sensitive to the impact of the Tokugawa settlement on the hitherto relatively independent ethos of members of the warrior estate; she is good on the dilemmas facing Tokugawa samurai. Under this regime, honor was “tamed” and “procedurized”. Refocussed and channeled into constructive modes of behavior, it was now subject to “moralization”29 and promoted “long-term goals”.30 At the same time, the earlier martial and violent honor survived as a substratum, “never completely eradicated”. It was preserved, Ikegami argues, for instance, in the Hagakure, which “created a ‘time bomb’ in Japanese culture”.31

The book is an impressive and at times even brilliant achievement. Ikegami has drawn on a large body of Japanese secondary writing, some of it fresh to English-language readers. She analyzes particular incidents with insight, and is duly sympathetic, at times arguably too sympathetic, to her subject. The book contains much fascinating detail. But it has a number of weaknesses. Some derive from its basic thematic and conceptual structure. Others reflect the reductionism seemingly inherent in the project of historical sociology.

The identification of honor as a major and positive cultural resource for modern Japan, first, suggests unpleasant moral ambiguities. Ikegami is of course sensitive to the association of honor with violence, though less, it seems to its implications in Japan’s twentieth-century history. On grounds of moral sensibility, not all readers seem likely to share her celebration of it as a positive value. A more serious structural problem, however, concerns the concept of “honorific individualism” itself. This self

26 Ikegami, 9.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 117.
29 Ibid., 236.
30 Ibid., 330.
31 Ibid., 298.
contradictory-sounding concept derives from the thought of Thomas Hobbes’ Leviathan, where the philosopher generalizes the concept of honor to include possession of material wealth and power. Ikekami links Hobbes’ honor to the “possessive individualism” that C.B. Macpherson, the distinguished Canadian scholar of Hobbes, identified in the tradition of seventeenth-century English political thought. At the same time, Ikekami shifts the sense of “honor” from its broad Hobbesian sense to the social value that is the opposite of shame. For her, honor is social approval and the recognition of dignity. The problem is that the two types of honor reflect different types of society. Hobbes, as Macpherson convincingly argues, accepted a model of society based on a market economy, acquisitiveness and “possessive individualism”. Ikekami’s social concept of honor more usually reflects a status-based society largely premised on pre-market relations. Her coupling of “individualism” and “honor” for the basic theme of her book thus creates a tension that informs the whole work. At the least, her key concept requires further explication.

“Individualism” typically places self before society; “honor” implicitly does the opposite. In the general understanding, honor is heteronomous: the source of honor lies outside the self, in society. Its antonym is shame. Honor is thus not to be equated with morality, for arguably immoral or amoral actions may attract honor. Only in a perfectly moral society, indeed, could honor and morality in practice mean the same thing. To make her thesis of the redirection of honor persuasive, Ikekami must extend the sense of honor to an internalized value “resid[ing] in the innermost depths of a person’s self-understanding”. In a similar direction, she writes, problematically, of a moralized honor linked to autonomy. Under the Tokugawa order, samurai “were required to demonstrate their moral autonomy when it touched upon the matter of their honor”. It is, however, difficult to see the sensitivity and violent response to insult that remained characteristic of samurai behavior throughout the period as the exercise of genuine “moral autonomy”. Thus Ikekami ends up constantly adjusting her concept of honor to reconcile two values which at best rest uneasily together. The result is that the semantic inclusiveness of honor is extended to the point where its analytical value becomes strained. Honor is not a talisman that explains everything. After all, even warriors in battle are driven as much by their individual need to survive and to gain access to the rewards of victory as by the need to defend their honor.

Ikekami is conscious that honor reflects primarily the social and particularistic here and now. She writes that “any honor culture is by its nature liable to serious conflict with a transcendental value system”. But Japan, she argues, was never historically exposed to a system of thought or “universalistic religion” that might challenge her honor culture. Japan “neither developed indigenous elitist counter-ideologies nor imported those of Western Europe”. As this suggests, Ikekami takes a limited view of Confucianism. That tradition, she thinks, “never became an ultimate religious value...
transcending the norms of a social group”. 38 She seems to reduce Japanese Confucianism to “logical skills” which merely supplemented “a remarkably strong sense of personal autonomy expressed in the idiom of the indigenous samurai culture”. 39 “Confucian teachers”, further, “did not and could not fundamentally challenge the emotional dimension of the samurai’s honor culture”. 40 They chose the path of “accommodation” 41 to Japanese society and its values.

Yet many have seen in Confucianism exactly such a potential challenge to existing society. Mencius celebrated the “great man”, who was “above the powers of riches and honors to make dissipated, of poverty and mean condition to make swerve from principle, and of power and force to make bend”. 42 And in Japan itself, a seventeenth-century Confucian could write that “The superior man is unconscious whether others know or do not know him. He merely develops his own virtue, irrespective of praise or reviling. Hence he is one who takes his own solitary course”. 43 But Ikegami discounts any alternative to her honor culture. Her main exemplars of Japanese Confucian behavior, in fact, are hardly good representatives of the tradition. They are Arai Hakuseki at the age of eighteen, at most one year after his discovery of Confucian learning, and Yoshida Shōin. Hakuseki, even in his maturity, was a man by temperament little interested in the internal life. As Kate Nakai remarks, he “was a Confucian ‘actor’ rather than a Confucian ‘thinker’”; 44 and Shōin’s thought was too much influenced by Japanese particularism and nationalism for him to be cited as an exemplar of the Confucian tradition.

In a similar direction, Ikegami paints a broad picture of Japanese Confucian thought that does not allow for significant exceptions or minority views. She writes of the inversion in priority of the two core Chinese Confucian values of loyalty (chū) and filial piety (kō) that took place in Japan, of “placing chū first and making kō secondary”. 45 This is of course the commonly accepted view, repeated constantly by ideologues and scholars since Tokugawa times. But it overlooks significant exceptions, where thinkers adhered, for complex reasons, to the Chinese priorities. 46 If historical sociology deals with the “resources” that the past brings to the present, then the past itself should not needlessly be painted in monochrome.

There are other significant omissions. Ikegami, like many other scholars, seems to overlook the influence of military philosophy on the Japanese value system. Yet the canon of Chinese military philosophy was as well known to samurai as the Confucian classics. Ming dynasty military treatises were also avidly read. Here was a deeply rooted ethos that has little to do with honor. “Though he be a dog or a beast, a warrior’s true task is to win”. 47 Surely it is unwise to

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38 Ibid., 306.
39 Ibid., 316.
40 Ibid., 319.
41 Ibid., 305.
42 Mencius, 3b, 2 (iii); James Legge tr., The Chinese Classics, 2 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960 [reprint of 2nd edition of 1895]): 265.
44 Nakai, 79.
45 Ikegami, 252.
47 For example, Hayashi Razan and Kumazawa Banzan. See I.J. McMullen, “Rulers
underestimate the starkly rational and realist approach legitimated by the military canon and inculcated in samurai by long historical exposure to warfare. This rationality, as much as “honorific individualism”, explains the “enormous individual courage and risk-taking” that Ikegami identifies in the Japanese response to the challenges of nation building in the Meiji period. Thus, surprisingly in one so sensitive to the complexity and internal dissonance within the culture of honor, Ikegami has simplified the pluralism of the Japanese tradition. In attributing so much to her indigenous “honorific individualism”, she comes close to the reductionism or essentialism that characterize certain styles of sociological writing on Japan. Her failings are, however, not crude. She is always sensitive to ambiguities and dilemmas, and her analyses are often very subtle.

Yet the tension between honor and individualism remains. In her “Epilogue”, Ikegami introduces a concept of “proximity”, whereby “a socially embedded sense of self... and a more subjective sense of self are brought into proximity”. Thus, she contends, honor and individuality need not be polarized; nor is honor “a dated and superficial concept”. Here, finally, Ikegami confronts the structural problem of her work. Yet her solution to the problem of the construction of the modern Japanese self has an element of déjà vu. It leads close to the familiar territory of the Nihonjinron. As Ikegami acknowledges in a footnote, her analysis is similar to the “contextualism” of scholars like Hamaguchi Esyun. Yet she strives to differentiate her work from such views. Perhaps it is her sensitivity to the weakness of her argument that leads her to conclude her book with a fierce attack on Ruth Benedict’s analysis of Japan as a shame-based culture.

In the end, Ikegami’s “honorific individualism” not only contains a morally repugnant element; it is also hard to accept as the key to the success of modern Japanese society. Her most serious contribution to the understanding of the Japanese historical inheritance seems likely to lie in her vivid sense of the layered, ambiguous and cumulative character of the Japanese historical experience.

III

The history of ideas, as pursued by scholars such as Arthur O. Lovejoy, views thought as relatively autonomous. Though he does not make this connection, in Yamashita’s survey, the “interpretive community” centered round William Theodore de Bary comes closest to this type of scholarship. True, Yamashita’s identification of de Bary with a particular approach is in some ways inappropriate, for de Bary’s influence has been as much institutional, through the funding for the field that he has secured, as intellectual. He would not wish to be associated with a particular approach. De Bary’s own work, however, as Yamashita points out, views Confucianism, particularly in its revived Neo-Confucian form, as a movement with the potential to develop or “unfold” doctrinally. Yamashita characterized the de


Bary method as differentiated from the “modernization” school by virtue of its positive view of Confucianism. That tradition was progressive, reformist, and, in certain manifestations, “liberal.” 51 Essentially, de Bary and his followers, though not of course insensitive to historical context, try to see Confucianism as an object of study in its own right, rather than as the product of given social environments. They seem to prefer to believe that ideas are an autonomous realm of experience, as objects of sympathetic study or even of belief. For them, Confucianism is a grand tradition diffused across the national boundaries of East Asia. Indeed, it almost has the texture of Christian Catholicism. Their approach might be called “theological” in the sense that the development of doctrine, the inter-relationship of divergent metaphysical emphases, and particularly the “spirituality” of the tradition, engage their keenest interest. It is significant that the Chinese and Japanese scholars who work with this group, men such as Okada Takehiko or Minamoto Ryōen, tend themselves to write from within the broad tradition of East Asian spirituality. In some sense, they tend to be bearers of its ethos.

Credit must be given to de Bary and those associated with him, including the late Professor Wing-tsit Chan and Irene Bloom, for the efforts that they have made over a long period, through seminars and other activities, to raise understanding of the Neo-Confucian world, particularly on the East Coast of the United States. The result has been an impressive volume of published work, a great collaborative effort, covering China, Korea and Japan. Yet it is not easy to feel one’s way into the world of belief and practice of a tradition as ramified and subtle as Neo-Confucianism. These publications do not always make for easy reading. It needs considerable scholarly powers to make the material incisive, persuasive and alive. Otherwise, the emphasis on doctrine too often produces a turgid or arid style. Too often, ideas and concepts are inadequately explained, listed as inert items in an insufficiently articulated or contextualised framework of belief and practice. Furthermore, the pan-East Asian perspective of the group imposes special technical and linguistic requirements, especially where Japan is concerned. Japanese Confucians belonged to a scholastic tradition. Most read Chinese effortlessly: some emulated their Chinese mentors by writing in that language. To write about, a fortiori to translate, this material requires facility in handling both classical Chinese and classical and modern Japanese. This expertise, it is difficult to deny, has not always been fully available.

Much of this work consists of translations with introductory essays that set the translation in context, a format of obvious value for American university teaching. Such was Mary Evelyn Tucker’s 1990 book, Moral and Spiritual Cultivation in Japanese Neo-Confucianism: The Life and Thought of Kaibara Ekken (1630-1714), 52 reviewed not uncritically by Yamashita. In the decade of the nineties, the same format is adopted by John Allen Tucker’s Itō Jinsai’s Gomō jigi and the Philosophical Definition of Early Modern Japan, published in 1998. 53 This work illustrates both the strengths and weaknesses of the de Bary approach.

51 Yamashita, 17-18.


Tucker’s introduction, first, is commendably transnational in perspective. He places *Go-Mō jigi* in a long tradition of “Confucian lexicography”, going back to the Sung dynasty and Ch’en Pei-hsi’s *Hsing-li tzu-i*. But he needs to write more convincingly about the relationship of Jinsai’s polemical work both to the received tradition and to its historical context. He uses such categories as “Neo-Confucian” with insufficient rigor; and he appears to have a simplistic understanding of the relationship of thought to its social background. His translation is also open to the criticism that he treats *Go-Mō jigi* as a text written in Japanese rather than in Chinese. This leads to problems with his English version. Another work somewhat in the same manner is Marleen Kassel’s *Tokugawa Confucian Education: The Kangien Academy of Hirose Tansō* (1782-1856). This work fills in the detail of the profile of this private academy provided in Richard Rubinger’s 1982 study, *Private Academies of Tokugawa Japan*. It also offers translations of key texts by Tansō. The background essay is more comprehensive than Tucker’s. Yet here, too, the limitations of the approach stand out. The book contains a biography, and summary of the development of Neo-Confucian doctrine in both China and Japan that, though accurate, is more than a little redolent of hagiography and adds little to the established understanding. Tansō’s philosophy is limned out. Central is the concept of “reverence”, but the reader is not offered any very convincing explanation of what significance this value might have in practice or in broader historical terms.

Not all those associated institutionally with de Bary share this sort of approach. Janine Anderson Sawada’s *Confucian Values and Popular Zen: Sekimon Shingaku in Eighteenth-Century Japan* (1993) deals with the general area of commoner Confucianism. This book falls more within religious than intellectual history. Here, at last, “spirituality” is given a more incisive and sophisticated treatment. Much of the book is factual and descriptive. The historical context emerges vividly. The process of training, the institutional and familial milieu, the problem of reconciling Zen Buddhist forms of enlightenment with Confucian moral teaching are sympathetically explored and their paradoxes exposed. This book conveys a graphic sense of Shingaku preachers as members of a commoner urban society, their limitations and their particular, quite modest, form of religiosity. If indeed there is a “de Bary tradition”, this represents it at its freest and most attractive best.

**IV**

Yamashita’s “new intellectual historians”, so prominently represented by such scholars as Tetsuo Najita, H. D. Harootunian, Herman Ooms and Victor Koschmann in the eighties, were less productive during the nineties. Yet several works from this group have remained important or continued to attract serious critical attention in the period under review. Two scholars, Naoki Sakai and Tetsuo Najita have produced work that

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56 Richard Rubinger, *Private Academies of Tokugawa Japan*.

may be addressed in a review such as this. Naoki Sakai’s *Voices of the Past: the Status of Language in Eighteenth-Century Japanese Discourse* was published in 1992. In its sheer density and difficulty, it remains *sui generis*. The book defied easy evaluation and inevitably aroused controversy. Its theoretical modality lay far beyond the range of most historians, even of practitioners of intellectual history; it was, however, admiringly reviewed by Yamashita himself, who seemed awe-struck by its theoretical claims. Five years after its publication, it was still arousing controversy. The book was the subject of a review article by Herman Ooms, the most open minded of the “new intellectual historians”, in the *Journal of Japanese Studies* in 1996. Ooms wrote with special authority as a scholar familiar with much of the largely continental literature that inspired Sakai’s seeming intellectual hypertrophy. He was, however, far less impressed than Yamashita. He argued convincingly that Sakai’s imposition of his own postmodernist problematic on Jinsai’s thought distorts Jinsai’s real concerns. Most tellingly, he accuses Sakai of twisting the meaning of his texts and of poor scholarship.

It is sometimes helpful, if presumptuous, when struggling with highly theoretical and unfamiliar work of this sort to assume that theoretical luxuriance conceals something relatively simple and accessible. In Sakai’s case, as Ooms would have it, he is looking for “an open-ended individualism” which will make it possible to do away with the normative ethics that smothers true ethical intention. In Sakai’s own words, “One is capable of being ethical precisely because one is uncertain of the consequences of an intended ethical action. Only when there is discontinuity between intent and consequences, is the ethical possible”. As with other aspects of postmodernism, there is a resonance with Zen Buddhism, as well as with modern anxieties about the role of language and metaphysics. Be that as it may, Sakai claimed to have found this non-normative ethics in Jinsai’s rejection of the Sung Neo-Confucian metaphysical view that identified moral norms with eternal principles immanent in men and in the external world. He argues that Jinsai believed that “ethical norms are established and affirmed in action, they do not exist either temporarily or logically anterior to action”.

But Jinsai was not a Buddhist and entertained no Buddhistic rejection of objective concepts. He believed in the existence of moral principles as taught by the Confucian Sages. It is difficult to reconcile Sakai’s “non-normative” understanding with, for instance, Jinsai’s own claim in *Go-Mō jigi* that “Although the goodnesses of the realm are many and the principles of the realm are numerous, yet benevolence, righteousness, ritual propriety and wisdom are the main points; and of the ten thousand goodnesses there is not one which is not itself included among them”. In the light of such passages, Sakai’s attempt to enlist Jinsai to resolve his postmodern predicament seems at best problematic. His book, it seems, remains mainly concerned with modern perceptions of the problem of

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59 Herman Ooms, “Tokugawa Texts”.
60 Sakai, 106; Ooms, “Tokugawa Texts”, 392.
61 Sakai, 105; Ooms, “Tokugawa Texts”, 393.
language and morality. As Sakai himself recently observed approvingly of cultural studies as a whole, “we are no longer simply talking about some kind of distant object, but we are really talking about our involvement in that object, too”. Mutatis mutandis, the self-absorption that these words suggest informs Voices of the Past.

Tetsuo Najita’s major contribution for the Cambridge History (1991), an attractive account of eighteenth-century thought, drew heavily on his Visions of Virtue of the preceding decade. It was structured, like the earlier work, around his dichotomy between “history” and “nature” as the basis of knowledge. Most recently, he has published Tokugawa Political Writings, in the series Cambridge Texts in Modern Politics. The stated aim of this series is to provide “authoritative and accessible” English-language editions of texts that “have been important in the politics of Latin America, Africa and Asia in the later nineteenth century and twentieth century, and which will continue in importance into the twenty-first.” Najita’s volume is devoted to two works by Ogyū Sorai, the Bendō and a partial translation of Benmei. Najita makes far-reaching claims for Sorai’s place in the modern world. He is a “pivotal referent”, recognized as “one who provides the conceptual handle with which to understand the modernization of Japan”. His ideas, “whose full significances have yet to be determined”, continue to reverberate.

Najita’s book has not been well-received. W.J. Boot, in a review article for Monumenta Nipponica, found that inaccuracies in translation and a failure to document quotations in Sorai’s text effectively disqualified it from serious consideration. Detailed examination of both introduction and translation confirms that this is a tendentious and misleading work. Both in his translation and his introductory essay, Najita systemically distorts Sorai’s thought in a liberal direction. Where Sorai is authoritarian, Najita depicts him as a kind of universalist inspired by a genial, nurturing spirit. Much of this is done on the basis of misinterpretation of Sorai’s text. This is not the place for a detailed critique of Najita’s English rendering. To take just one fairly representative example from the translation, however, Najita translates the canonical expression shen tu, literally “cautious over being alone”, as “humble

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67 Ibid., i.

68 Ibid., xiv.

69 Ibid., xiii.

70 Ibid., x.


72 Such a critique is undertaken in my review article, “Ogyū Sorai and the Definition of Terms”, Japan Forum 13:2 (Autumn, 2001): 249-65. This review develops material first presented in the Ohio State University workshop and I am grateful to Philip Brown for agreeing to its separate publication. It is hoped to explore the utilitarian character of Sorai’s thought and his debt to Mo-tzu in a further article.
autonomy”. His rendition suggests a whole wealth of associations remote from Sorai’s mental world. Sorai did not, as Najita’s use of “autonomy” suggests, underwrite an individual’s capacity to determine his own conduct. Rather, he believed that behavior should be controlled by external institutions. At most, for Sorai, shen tu referred to a disciplined self-control when out of the sight of others. It had nothing to do with the determination of moral choice suggested by the English “autonomy”. Significantly, Sorai was deeply hostile to Mencius, the classical Chinese Confucian who most promoted individual autonomy. Indeed, Bendō and Benmei are anti-Mencian and in many ways illiberal tracts.

Sorai’s thought was also profoundly elitist. Najita’s introduction, however, credits Sorai with the view that the people could intellectually grasp the Way and determine their conduct accordingly. But, in a passage from Benmei not translated by Najita, Sorai explicitly denied the utility of attempting to explain the Confucian way to people in general. Rather, they were to submit to institutional control and be transformed unconsciously through its influence. Nor was Sorai in practice a particularly benevolent Confucian. He advocated the sale of human beings, and summary execution of absconding servants by their samurai masters.

What has happened here? Why should the “new intellectual history” often be so critically received? Are reviewers merely petulant or pedantic to insist on more disciplined understanding of the texts? More broadly, are critics of the “new intellectual history” spoilers of its shining project to disclose the true construction of knowledge and power? Answers to such questions are contingent on ideological preference: none is likely to satisfy all parties to the debate. Over time, it is true, scholars will cumulatively reach judgment as to what work has enduring merit and what is merely fashionable; such judgment will transcend the controversies of the here and now. Meanwhile, however, it is worth noting that Herman Ooms, himself no mean theoretician, finds fault with both Harootunian and Sakai for distorted or unreliable reading of their primary texts. Theory, it seems, can indeed deflect from scholarly soundness. Najita is a different case, for his work, though theoretically sophisticated, is generally much more accessible to ordinary readers. But with him, too, inattention to language and the momentum of his own exegesis would seem to carry him away from fidelity to the meaning of his original texts.

Yet theory need not distort, overburden or render work inaccessible to the ordinary reader of intellectual history. A refreshing example of just how judiciously it can combine with empirical research is provided by Gregory Smits’s 1999 monograph, Visions of Ryukyu: Identity and Ideology in Early-modern Thought and Politics. The theoretical underpinnings

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73 Najita, ed., Tokugawa Political Writings, 97.
76 Ooms describes Harootunian’s Tokugawa “populism” as “textually unfounded” (“Tokugawa Texts”, 386); and indicts Sakai (together with Harootunian) for “twisted meanings” (Ibid., 400).
77 Gregory Smits, Visions of Ryukyu: Identity and Ideology in Early-Modern Thought
of this book are not extensive; they seem to consist largely of the ideas on community and state of Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner and Prasenjit Duara. The attraction of the subject lies in the challenge to self-definition experienced by a small island political community caught between two powerful neighbours. True, Smits draws critically on a considerable Japanese secondary literature, and his book is something in the nature of a survey. Nor is he embarrassed to leave some problems unsolved. But he is sensitive to the internal and external pressures that influenced the choice of ideological strategy among the Ryukyu elites. His account ranges from the question of human agency in Confucian thought to practical matters such as silviculture on the islands. Yet, in spite of this range, his account is always lucid and accessible. Smits’s story is inherently dramatic. His depiction of Sai On’s use of Confucian ideas to assert Ryukyuan autonomy within the East Asian context is especially compelling. As he claims himself, his analysis of Sai On’s use of Confucianism illuminates the spread of that tradition beyond its homeland.

V

The foregoing review has touched on the most salient work on Tokugawa intellectual history in English of the last decade. Of the books mentioned here, two, those of Ikegami and Najita, stand out, by virtue of their subject matter or circumstances of publication, as most likely to reach a wide readership. These books may well form the image of Tokugawa intellectual tradition among students and the non-specialist public. It is incumbent on the community of scholars to test such work for accuracy and reliability. Ikegami and Najita write in very different modes. But each seems to have distorted the subject of their book by masking what many would perceive as its negative aspects. It is interesting that neither Ikegami nor Najita discusses “military philosophy”, the realist tradition widely studied among samurai and others during the period. This tradition has certainly deeply influenced Japan’s intellectual and cultural inheritance. True, Ikegami characterizes the Tokugawa regime as a “garrison state”, 78 thus implicitly recognizing the role of threatened violence in its governance. However, while siting honor at the basis of the dominant tradition and acclaiming it as a positive resource, she pays insufficient attention to its historically destructive side. She does little to confront what she would surely concede have been its terrible workings out in the twentieth century. Najita, likewise, does not discuss Sorai’s well-documented interest in Chinese military writing or its impact on his thought. Still less does he mention or attempt to dispose of the charge of Arai Hakuseki, himself a “strong-arm” Confucian, that Sorai “sought to present the Sun tzu as a model for government”. 79

There are, therefore, lacunae which, it may be suggested, should be addressed. It is these gaps, rather than, for instance, a radical re-periodization, that challenge scholars in the field. For the conventional concept of “Tokugawa intellectual history” retains natural chronological boundaries. It has a natural beginning with the freeing of Neo-Confucianism from Buddhist and court noble control early in the seventeenth century; and a natural end with the granting of public access to western texts with the end of the century.

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78 Ikegami, 156.

and Politics (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999).
Tokugawa period. Among the lacunae within this period, clearly, the influence of military thought is one. But polemics within the intellectual world also deserve further exploration. Both John Allen Tucker’s misrecognition of the polemical nature of Itō Jinsai’s thought and Najita’s overly bland presentation of Sorai suggest that it will be profitable to pay more attention to controversies among intellectuals in the period. For, axiomatically, such arguments demonstrate faultlines in the thought of those who mount them. Jinsai’s dismantling of Sung Neo-Confucian dualist metaphysics reveals his deep aversion to certain forms of mysticism and self-deconstruction. Sorai’s anti-Mencian views help plot his position on a range of questions, including the important one of human moral subjectivity. The primary sources for Tokugawa intellectual history certainly contain references to many other controversies that could usefully be analyzed. Like geological fissures, such divisions of opinion reveal underlying formations.

Intellectual biography, too, unfashionable though it may be, can be illuminating. Biography can be subsumed under what Maruyama Masao once called the “approach via the subject”. It is in some ways a humbler task than the “approach by the method” that uses exalted theory. Yet it can provide a useful control over the sometimes procrustean tendencies of the latter. It is a commonplace that one way to understand an age is through its larger minds. Fortunately, the Tokugawa period is formidably well documented, and more and more primary material is being published in accessible editions. Searching inquiry into the lives and confrontations of able and articulate men and women is always likely to be instructive. This sort of inquiry should not be inhibited by Herman Ooms’s too lightly passed denunciation of the “worn and by now questionable trope . . . of the unfulfilled promise” of Tokugawa thought. Ooms’s own interpretation, of course, promotes a notion of “closure” that is inhospitable to radical alternatives. But many Tokugawa intellectuals thought deeply about the betterment of their society; not all underwrote the status quo. Some drew on elements of Chinese thinking that challenged the dominance of what Ooms calls the “discursive edifice” of “submissiveness to the political order.”

Equally, some were frustrated. But their analyses may contain criticisms of their present that remain of interest.

Again, accuracy of linguistic understanding must be recognized as a sine qua non for this of all fields. It can no longer be acceptable to treat texts written in Chinese as though they were Japanese. While Yamashita was right to express gratitude for the increased availability of modern translations, he was wrong to imply that credit should be given for not relying on them. Najita’s work shows how easy it is to impose wishful readings on a text if linguistic understanding is insufficiently rigorous. Perfect accuracy may be unattainable, but it should still remain a discipline to strive for.

No doubt the divisions that have so conspicuously characterized the field over the last two decades will be perpetuated in some form. But there is a sense that the most virulent and destructive phase of controversy is spent. In 1999, Harry Harootunian and Naoki Sakai published a dialogue in the Duke University periodical positions, entitled “Japan studies and cultural studies”. The dialogue is

80 Ooms, “Tokugawa Texts”, 86.
82 See above, note 63.
informed by bitterness and self-commiseration. The titles of subsections tell the story. They include: "The crisis of Japan studies in the United States", "Culturism and the postwar policies of the United States", "The missionary positionality and the production of knowledge"; "Academic journalism and the hostility to theory"; "Colonial legacy and ethnocentrism"; and so on. The burden of the argument is that Japanese Studies in the United States has been an instrument of political and colonial power; that critical theory can expose this situation; but that critical theorists have been victimized or even "portrayed . . . as criminals" by a Japanese studies establishment centered in major universities and working through journals such as the Journal of Japanese Studies and Monumenta Nipponica. These journals are described as enforcing their ideology through, among other things, a pedantic insistence in reviews on accuracy in translation.

The dialogue would seem both to overstate and understate the case for "theory". From a trans-Atlantic perspective, the claims of victimization are shrill. After all, the work of the main bearers of "theory" in Tokugawa intellectual history, Najita, Harootunian and Ooms, has been available in attractive and reasonably-priced paperback editions. Sakai’s Tokugawa book was published by a distinguished university press. These scholars have had ample opportunity to present their views. Indeed, the impression is sometimes conveyed that theirs has been the "hegemonic" discourse. It is the works on eccentric thinkers, precisely the witnesses to the heterogeneity that the theorists claim to value, which seem to have been under-supported and starved of recognition. Nor are Harootunian and Sakai justified in representing theory as rejected. Perhaps they have confounded broader issues with the often hostile critical response to their own work. Intellectual history abounds with examples of radical ideas that, after initial resistance, have entered common discourse. Many of the central insights of postmodernism on power and on the contingency of language that Harootunian, Sakai and others have striven to promote will, without doubt, be absorbed into the mainstream of scholarly consciousness and method. Mature scholarship will not be allergic to the best theoretical writing. Moreover, for all the perceived shortcomings of some of the work of the 'Chicago group', most scholars would surely concede that the field looks different, livelier, more exciting and imaginative, since they have visited it.

All that said, no one would wish to deny the larger point that the diversity of method and approach sketched above is a sign of vitality. The different styles of scholarship do mostly, as Yamashita suggested, contribute to understanding of the Tokugawa intellectual world. The fertility of the field remains a cause for celebration. Of course, there can be no final version of Tokugawa intellectual history. As long as understanding of man, individually and collectively, changes, so will the reading of the Tokugawa historical material necessarily also change. It is likely to remain a subject of fruitful contestation.

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83 Harootunian, in Harootunian and Sakai, 612.
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