The aims of this paper are threefold: (1) to consider what Western historians mean when they speak of Early Modern Japan, (2) to propose that we reconceive this period from the perspective of world networks history, and (3) to lay out some of the advantages I believe this offers for thinking about Sengoku and Tokugawa society.

The idea that Japan had an early modern period is gradually becoming common in every sector of our field, from institutional to intellectual history. Yet what that means has rarely been discussed until now, even in the minimal sense of determining its temporal boundaries. I want to thank David Howell and James Ketelaar for raising the issue in this forum, prompting what I hope will become an ongoing conversation about our periodization practices.

To my knowledge, the sole attempt in English to trace the intellectual genealogy of this concept is John Hall’s introduction to the fourth volume of the Cambridge History of Japan—a volume that he chose to title Early Modern Japan. Hall dates this expression to the 1960s, when “the main concern of Western scholars of the Edo period was directed toward explaining Japan’s rapid modernization.” Its ascendancy was heralded by the 1968 publication of Studies in the Institutional History of Early Modern Japan, which Hall co-edited with Marius Jansen. “By declaring that the Tokugawa period should be called Japan’s ‘early modern’ age,” he reflects, “this volume challenged the common practice of assuming that Japan during the Edo period was still fundamentally feudal.” Although Hall sees the modernization paradigm as having been superseded in later decades, he nonetheless reads the continuing popularity of the early modern designation as a sign that most Western historians today see the Edo era as “more modern than feudal.” This notion is reiterated in even more pointed terms by Wakita Osamu in the same volume. “One particularly prominent and powerful idea” among Western historians of Japan, Wakita writes, “has been to use the term ‘early modern’ to refer to the kinsei period, thus avoiding the Marxist categories of analysis favored by many Japanese and, at the same time, drawing attention away from the period’s feudal aspects and toward those long-term trends related to the emergence of the modern Japanese state and economy after 1868.”

1. Many thanks to the colleagues, students, and friends who have shared their thoughts on the subject of early modernity, especially Philip Brown, Andrew Gordon, William Hauser, David Howell, Martin Lewis, Henry Smith, Andre Wink, the Early Modern Japan Network, the Early Modern History Workshop at Madison, and the Geographical Perspectives in Asian History seminar. Thanks also to Kris Troost for sharing her internet expertise and for help in tracking down sources.

2. This stands in stark contrast to the situation in Meiji studies, where the problem of what modernity means in the Japanese context, and when it began, have been central concerns at least since mid-century. While the Meiji debate has important implications for understanding what we are here calling early modernity, an analysis of those connections lies outside the scope of the present essay.

A glance through recent bibliographies in the field confirms that the Edo period as a whole is seldom referred to anymore as Feudal Japan (even if the political order of the time is still "habitually and haphazardly" characterized that way6). It is also interesting that, in the early 1970s, a few Tokugawa scholars who identified their subject as "pre-modem" began to do so in quotation marks.7 But is the growing preference for "early modern" best understood in Hall’s and Wakita’s terms? The evidence is ambiguous at best. Consider the half-dozen books on Japan published in the last twenty years that feature the words Early Modern in their titles.8 Together they span a wide range of topics, from early Tokugawa diplomacy9 to late Tokugawa ideology,10 from travel11 to disease,12 and from a broad but environmentally anchored survey13 to an anthology on Edo and Paris.14 The last volume fits Hall’s paradigm nicely (the editors explicitly identifying both cities as “capitals of absolutism”15), but the other five formulate their problems in terms that seem to eschew the feudal/modern dichotomy altogether.16 And the range of casual usage is wider still. When people like Harry Harootunian and David Howell call the Tokugawa period “early modern,”17 can this choice of words meaningfully be read as an attempt to avoid Marxian categories of analysis?

This is not to suggest that the echoes of 1960s scholarship that Hall hears in the words Early Modern Japan have faded away entirely. On the contrary, it is precisely for its perceived associations with a Weberian model of modernization that the expression attracts one group of scholars18 while provoking resistance from another. I was unaware of this resistance until I raised the issue on the Early Modern Japan Network this spring. To my surprise, some colleagues responded that they find the whole notion distastefully teleological, hearing in it a sounding of the past for the outlines of a proto-present.19 Others objected that it has inescapably Eurocentric overtones, calling to mind such Western developments as the rise of the absolutist state, the spread of secular thought, the

8. To my knowledge, the only book to date other than those discussed here that employs this designation in its title (aside from those mentioned above [Hall and Jansen 1968 and Hall 1991]) is George Elison’s earlier Deus Destroyed: The Image of Christianity in Early Modern Japan [1973]. If readers are aware of others I have overlooked, I would be grateful for the correction.
9. Ronald Toby’s State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan: Asia in the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu [1984].
11. Constantine Vaporis’s Travel and the State in Early Modern Japan [1994].
15. McClain, Merriman, and Ugawa 1994:11. The temporal framework of the volume is specified in terms of political developments as “the period from the 1590s, when the Bourbons and Tokugawa rose to power, until the 1780s and 1790s, when the monarchy fell and the collapse of the Kansei reforms marked the beginning of several difficult decades that culminated in the Meiji Restoration” (xvii).
16. Although I have not done a comprehensive search, the only discussion of feudalism that I have discovered in these books is a footnote in Conrad Totman’s textbook, noting that he and others have long preferred to characterize the polity as neither feudal nor absolutist but ‘federal.’ Totman 1993:49, n. 12. Totman refers to the periodization issue only in passing, noting that the years between 1568 and 1868 are “commonly called Japan’s early modern period” (1993:xxv).
19. To be sure, research in the roots-of-modernization mode is still well represented in the field, as suggested by the title of Akira Havami’s recent book, Pre-conditions to Industrialization in Japan (1986).
growth of cities, the expansion of mercantile capitalism, and the like. The search for such random parallels, some argue, ignores the distinctiveness of the Japanese cultural milieu.

Judging from a preliminary survey of current writing in the field, however (as well as from some other suggestive comments on the internet), I am persuaded that most of us who use the location Early Modern Japan have something rather different in mind. While this expression might once have suggested a particular historiographical take on Japanese institutions, it no longer necessarily functions as a code-word in this way—primarily because the debate to which Hall refers is no longer compelling across the broad field of Japanese historical studies. In most cases, the viable choice for designating our temporal locus of interest is not “the feudal period,” but the Sengoku, Tokugawa, or Edo period. Given this set of alternatives, the salient feature of early modern is its cosmopolitanism. By locating our work in a chronology that has relevance outside Japan, it seems, what we are really doing is staking our intellectual claims on a wider terrain than that of Japanese studies. To the extent that this expression remains a code word in our field in the 1990s, what it signals to me is a desire to transcend parochial boundaries and to engage with other histories (and other historians).

Traditionally, the major way to do that has been through reference to European analogies or universal models (the latter usually generalized from European experience). Comparative work in this vein is often provocative and widely read—despite wary reactions from “suspicious people” (as Ashin Das Gupta calls his camp). The other way to engage with historians outside one’s own field, of course, is by exploring cross-cultural linkages. But linkage-history has traditionally been the province of those who study diplomacy, trade, migration, missions, and the like—subjects with an obvious international dimension. It is less often considered relevant for those who work at the national and local levels.

The conversations that have been formative for my own thinking about early modernity, however, effectively fuse these two approaches, situating comparisons within a highly-developed map of cross-cultural linkages. This method has yielded a relatively new sub-discipline that might be called “world networks history”: “world” to suggest a trans-oceanic reach, “networks” to highlight an.

20. It would appear that the more energetic debate over early modernity in Chinese studies has been largely influenced by this kind of an agenda. According to Antonia Finnane’s recent assessment, “the chronology of nationalism and modernity in China remains a more or less disputed point. Evidence of commerce, the so-called ‘roots of capitalism,’ urbanization, increasing literacy, voluntary associations, and so on—in brief, the trappings of a civil society—can all be drawn upon to support the notion of an ‘early modern China’ emerging around the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries (Rawski 1991; Feuerwerker 1992). Parallel arguments can be mounted in the sphere of arts and letters, with Elman positing the emergence of evidential philosophy as the decisive conjuncture in late imperial history, and Vinograd’s research on the rise in portrait painting suggesting the discovery of the autonomous self (Elman 1990; Vinograd 1992). Related observations on the integration of the Chinese economy and culture can be used to suggest the existence of a nation in China pre-dating the age of nationalism (cf. Duara 1993:2-9).” Finnane 1994: 1161.

21. John Hall himself has repeatedly voiced strong objections to the application of European-derived models to Japanese history, but he clearly does not find such models to be implicit in the early modern concept. For instance, the introduction to Japan Before Tokugawa: Political Consolidation and Economic Growth, 1500 to 1650 (edited by Hall, Nagahara Keiji, and Kozo Yamamura) asserts flatly that “most of the institutional end products of the sixteenth-century revolution ... were idiosyncratic to the point that the use of the European analogy or any general model based on European data for analytical purposes is more apt to distort than to assist the historian in his effort to understand their meaning” (Hall, Nagahara, and Yamamura 1981: 15-16). The same essay glosses the Japanese term kinsei as “early modern” (p. 11).

22. “Preindustrial” is also sometimes used in socio-economic contexts; e.g., Hanley and Yamamura 1977.

23. In practice, the “other histories” where an early modern period is invoked are limited to western Europe, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Japan, and increasingly China (although “late imperial” is more commonly used to identify these centuries in the Chinese past). Historians of Africa and the Americas rarely identify an early modern period in those continents’ histories, favoring instead the terms precolonial (or pre-Columbian) and colonial.

emphasis on patterned interactions, and "history" to underline a concern with the formation and transformation of these socio-spatial interactions over time. Early modernity in this literature is characterized, not in terms of a European paradigm or universal model of development, but as a particular configuration of global relationships: one brought about by new modes of navigation, finance, and weaponry in the fifteenth century, and brought to an end by the appearance of still more potent technologies of power at the beginning of the last century. At the risk of oversimplification, the early modern configuration could be said to have been created by the gunpowder revolution circa 1450 and superseded by the spread of industrial capitalism and European imperialism after 1800. But this set of markers is more suggestive than definitive. In practice, the temporal boundaries identified as bracketing the early modern period vary by as much as a century either way, depending on the domain in question.

The global perspective on early modernity has been most fully articulated in the burgeoning field of Indian Ocean studies. Nor is this surprising, since the Indian Ocean—"the hub of world trade in early modern times"—was radically altered by, and contributed in singular ways to, the formation of the new world networks. But crucial contributions have been made by historians of other places and topics as well. Among the most important are studies of the gunpowder revolution, the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, and English commercial empires, the much-disputed "seventeenth-century crisis," the intercontinental exchange of food crops and diseases, the nomadic empires of Central Asia, the Chinese and other trading diaspora, and the circulation of precious metals and other monetary media. As this (admittedly idiosyncratic) list suggests, world networks historians to date have been largely preoccupied with technology and political economy, most especially with military and monetary history. Guns and silver were, after all, the leading edge that sliced through long-standing regional boundaries. Yet cultural and intellectual developments are being fruitfully reexamined from a world networks perspective as well.

25. I prefer this formulation both to the world systems vocabulary of Immanuel Wallerstein (1974), which is rooted in a mechanistic paradigm, and to Philip Curtin's "comparative world history" (Curtin 1984), which does not convey the centrality of cross-cultural linkages. Michael Mann's (1986) insistence that socio-spatial networks of power constitute the essential units of analysis for comparative historical sociology has been formative for my conceptual vocabulary.

26. The sources I have found most stimulating are Chaudhuri 1985; Perlin 1983; Reid 1988, 1993a, 1993b; Subrahmanyam 1990; and Lieberman 1993a—a very modest sampling of a vast literature.

27. Wink 1993:106.


35. In a longer historical view, the "leading edge" may have been spices. Wolfgang Schivelbusch writes that "in their cultural significance spices were wholly medieval ... [yet] they existed like foreign bodies in the medieval world, forerunners of the loosened boundaries of modern times. The medieval spice trade had already done away with narrow local borders." He goes on to speculate that it would be rewarding "to study how long the process of 'reorientation,' so to speak, lasted, whereby [the Spaniards'] lust for pepper was transformed into one for precious metals." Schivelbusch 1993:12.

36. The subject of the cross-cultural exchange of ideas is only now being brought into an explicit world-networks framework. For a survey of the spread of world religions to 1500 that adopts this perspective, see Bentley 1993; for a bold thesis linking national
Taken together, this corpus of work proposes a way to conceive of early modernity as a global phenomenon, acknowledging Europeans' role without exaggerating it or making it somehow paradigmatic. Research on Indian Ocean and China Seas trade, for instance, has made it clear that Europeans neither created nor quickly dominated exchange networks in that part of the world. Throughout the eastern four-fifths of Eurasia, the newcomers remained dependent for many decades on local traders' capital and commercial expertise, and were obliged to accommodate themselves to long-established conventions of exchange. Accordingly, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in southern and eastern Asia have been pointedly characterized as "the age of commerce" or "the age of partnership" rather than "the age of conquest."

At the same time, work on earlier periods has shown that the modern world was not created de novo by the new technologies of the fifteenth century. It is now widely accepted that both maritime and overland trade links were well established in earlier eras, bridging the whole of what Marshall Hodgson called "the Afro-Eurasian ecumene." The conventional chronology suggests that early modern integration was in part a revival of contacts that had lapsed in the wake of the Black Death, and that it represented not the first but at least the fourth major surge of pan-Eurasian interaction in historical times. Likewise, the agricultural, demographic, and commercial intensification that marked this era is also understood to have been under way for some time before 1450.

In short, world networks historians do not envision the fifteenth century as the sole or even necessarily the greatest watershed in human history. One gets a sense less of a single "Great Transformation" than of a long, cumulative, and accelerating series of pulses of intensification in cross-cultural exchange. Each reconstitution of the network has had its own distinctive contours, yet in general each peak of interaction has been higher than the last, and over time the relationships have become both more extensive and more complex.

cultural standardization throughout Eurasia to the diffusion of firearms and the creation of centralized polities, see Lieberman 1993a.


39. In Southeast Asia, the tide had turned by the mid seventeenth century, and in South Asia by the late eighteenth, but in East Asia the balance of power favored indigenous regimes until the mid nineteenth century. As Peter Klein puts it, "With the arrival of Vasco da Gama in Calicut on 27 May 1498 ... the European economie-monde had somehow or other succeeded in breaking through the spatial limits of its regional confinement. ... But did they really succeed as far as the maritime space of the China seas is concerned? It is my contention that they did not. At least not until after the middle of the nineteenth century when conditions had become quite different." Klein 1989: 64. For related views see Boxer 1969, Murphey 1977.

40. The previous three high-points of inter-Eurasian trade coincided with the establishment of stable, large-scale polities across the continent during the era of the Han and Roman empires (2nd c BC - 2nd c AD), the early Medieval age (6th - 11th c), and the brief period of Mongol unification (ca. 1250-1350 AD). See, e.g., Abu-Lughod 1989, Curtin 1988, Bentley 1993 (Frank and Gills [1993] argue that similar pulses of intercontinental exchange can be traced back to the Bronze age). Whether the Indian Ocean circuits shared in the otherwise widespread decline of the fourteenth century in unclear; see Wink 1993.

41. This is suggested, for instance, by the "medieval agricultural revolution" in various parts of the world, and by evidence that a growing demand for monetary media preceded the great flows of Japanese and Peruvian silver into India and China (on the latter, see Perlin 1986). I am indebted to Andre Wink for suggesting that such developments represent a general secular rise in the density of social and economic life across Eurasia, the product of patient spadework that began well before 1450.

42. cf. Hayami 1986.

43. A cognate vision of Chinese history is propounded by G. William Skinner (1985), whose synthetic vision I admire but whose conceptual vocabulary I find uncongenial. For a more extended discussion of Skinner's work on regional systems, see Wigen 1992:15-16.
If one is justified nonetheless in singling out the fifteenth century as the beginning of the modern world, it is because of two roughly synchronous and immensely important discontinuities. One was the wholly unprecedented scope of long-distance contact. Not only did Western Europeans begin to turn up in Gujarat and Malacca, bypassing numerous links in the established chains of exchange; at roughly the same time, they also stumbled onto the Americas. Only with the “discovery of the sea” in the late fifteenth century did the history of these two old worlds become entangled; only then did the global network begin to assume its modern dimensions. The other momentous change of this era was the appearance of reliable and powerful firearms. In Victor Lieberman’s words, the fifteenth-century military revolution “rapidly transformed the political equation throughout Eurasia.” The new killing tools everywhere “accelerated centralization by conferring an enormous cumulative advantage on the wealthiest, most innovative powers in each region—and, conversely, by raising the cost of warfare beyond the means of more local units.” These two developments, then—a radical increase in the spatial scope of long-distance interaction, and a comparable leap in the spatial organization of social power—marked the onset of modernity, setting the stage for both the loosening of boundaries and the “time-space compression” that are the keynotes of modern life.

This may be old news for historians of East Asia. Anyone who has been following the Asian studies journals over the past two decades has been party to much of this conversation, and some of our colleagues have made important contributions to the literature. Nonetheless, Japanese specialists are not yet very well represented in this discussion; it is mostly other Asianists who are doing the creative work of fitting Japan into the emerging picture of global early modernity. Moreover, while our awareness of this work may have changed the way we talk about Hideyoshi’s world in our survey courses, there is less evidence that we consider global integration a relevant backdrop for, say, literature, or gender relations, or even urbanization. For the bulk of the Tokugawa era, international issues (diplomacy, the silver trade) tend to be separated from intra-national developments (everything else) as if there were an impermeable wall between them. How often is the gradual diffusion of the sweet potato mentioned in the context of Tokugawa population trends? or the 1685 restrictions on silk imports considered in discussions of protoindustrialization? As

44. Discovery of the Sea is the title of J.H. Parry’s celebrated study of navigation, mapping, and ship design in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Parry 1981 [1974]).


46. The notion of time-space compression is elaborated in Harvey 1989, Part III. In Harvey’s view, the dazzling, dismaying developments of finance capital in the 1980s (compounded in the present decade by capital’s forays into cyberspace) are but the latest round in this continuing process, and might better be termed hyper-modern than post-modern.

47. Notably Innes (1980), Toby (1984), Tashirot (1976, 1989), and Yamamura and Kamiki (1983). Not surprisingly, all of these contributions discuss Japan’s international trade, and several focus on the export of silver and copper—undoubtedly the most important link between Japan and the wider world in this era. Japanese silver is now estimated to have constituted over 30% of all new silver put into circulation between the 1570s and the end of the seventeenth century; speaking primarily of the copper that succeeded it, Anthony Reid writes that “the privileged access of the VOC to Japanese minerals after 1639 through its factory at Deshima was critical to the success of the Dutch world-economy in Asia.” Reid 1993a: 288.


49. The Edo and Paris volume, for instance, while discovering a remarkable range of parallels in the two cities, essentially treats them as disjunct analytical subjects (Henry Smith’s discussion of print technology representing an important exception). The editors’ introduction does not discuss the international context in which Edo and Paris operated, and events that radically altered that context (such as the Tokugawa exclusion decrees) are not noted in the prefatory timeline (xix-xxv).

50. The outstanding exception in recent years is China in the Tokugawa World (Jansen 1992). A related study, analyzing the continuing engagement of Tokugawa thinkers with both Chinese and Western science, is Sugimoto and Swain 1989.

51. Susan Haney’s essay on material culture, in volume 4 of the Cambridge History of Japan, notes that “sweet potatoes may
valiantly as Ronald Innes, Ron Toby, and others have tried to keep the door ajar, not much light seems to come through from the other side before the 1540s or after the 1630s.

Taking the cosmopolitan periodization scheme of world networks history seriously might open up new questions for research. What might it mean to see the exclusion policies of the 1630s as less a unique Japanese phenomenon than part of a pan-Eurasian swing away from the trade peak of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries? How might the rise of Neo-Confucianism and nativist thought be recast in light of evidence that international linkages in this period everywhere tended to nurture nationalistic reactions, promoting “exclusive and isolating” cultural orthodoxies? Or, to hit closer to home, how might local histories be enriched if regional development were viewed as inextricably related to the world across Japan’s borders? Presumably, it should be possible to perceive echoes of global integration in the most disparate of social phenomena, at the most local of levels, long after the downscaling of international trade. My own research in southern Shinano suggests that this is the case. The packhorse trains and protoindustries that reshaped central Honshu’s landscapes in the eighteenth century cannot be fully accounted for without reference to the long-term rhythms of world networks history.

Similar issues might be posed in the Sengoku period. To suggest that Japan’s involvement in the early modern world begins not in 1568 or even 1543 but a full century earlier ought to raise new questions about everything from politics to culture in the “late medieval” period. For a hundred years before the Portuguese landed in Tanegashima, Japanese traders and pirates participated in the “Age of Commerce” heralded by Zheng He’s expeditions of the early 1400s. To some extent, we know that their exposure to “the mobile, commercial, competitive order of the early modern period” worked to “loosen the controls” of an earlier age, contributing to the “entrepreneurial, fragmented, and competitive society” of Sengoku Japan. But how might such linkages with the wider world (however tenuous and fragmented) have impinged on, say, the spread of a cross-class “national culture” (which Barbara Ruch traces to this period), or the “culture of lawlessness” in Kyoto (vividly evoked by Beth Berry)? How does it change our perception of these and other Sengoku developments to think of the Onin War as an early act in the modern transformation of Japan?

These questions are simply meant to suggest that a linkage perspective could shed light on specific topics in Sengoku and Tokugawa history. But engaging seriously with world networks history could be of much broader significance for the field as well. What such an engagement offers above all is a bracing corrective to the problem of de-contextualized comparative research. As Geoffrey Parker, Victor Lieberman, and others have persuasively shown, trans-national relationships explain many of the cross-cultural isomorphisms at the national level that have long struck historians of these centuries. The diffusion of firearms and the appearance of well have been an important factor in maintaining a dense population in Japan in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (1991:682), but this is not followed up elsewhere; there is no sustained analysis of population trends in the volume. Totman devotes half a page to the sweet potato when discussing the Kyoho Reform (1993:313), but does not mention it in his treatment of agricultural intensification, demography, or famines.

52. Jansen (1992:39), following Innes, deems this “the greatest import-substitution program of them all.”
53. Reid 1993a, ch. 5; but see also Lieberman 1993b, Pombejra 1993.
54. Lieberman 1993a:531.
56. Quotations are from a description of early modern South China in Ownby and Heidhues 1993:5, 21.
58. For suggestive analyses of how quickly the Europeans’ impact could reverberate beyond the limited zone of direct contact in the Americas and Africa, see Wolf 1982, Meinig 1989.
new forms of mobile wealth created similar problems and potentials for states from one end of Eurasia to the other. It is not coincidental that Japanese responses to those challenges bore structural resemblances to responses elsewhere in the Eurasian rim—territorial integration, fiscal reform, an elaboration of commercial reticula, and the spread of centrally-defined cultural norms being notable among them.  

At the same time, a networks perspective also helps to illuminate what is peculiarly Japanese about Early Modern Japan. Some local differences, of course, were simply the product of distinctive cultural legacies. To quote Victor Lieberman, “we are dealing with societies whose convergences affected what were arguably superficial features (in somewhat the same way perhaps as fish and dolphins responded to the same hydrodynamic imperatives with similar body shapes while remaining phylogenetically distinct).” Yet the societies that Lieberman compares to fish and dolphins did not swim freely about. Rather, they were tied to specific places—and the environment that shaped them was not everywhere uniform. Each early modern society experienced the challenges of the age in a different way, depending not only on its distinctive cultural legacy but also on such relational considerations as who its neighbors were, whether it harbored resources that foreign merchants desired, its accessibility and defensibility given the technological conditions of the time, and the like. A different set of relational issues differentiated the experience of early modernity from one place to another at the sub-national level as well.

In short, military technology and mercantile capital may have created similar imperatives over a broad terrain, but their operation was still constrained by the friction of distance and by the contours of physical and social space. A keen sense of Japan’s position in the global trading world (and not just “Japan’s,” but Satsuma’s, Edo’s, Matsumae’s, and so on) is thus indispensable if we would apprehend what was unique about Japanese early modernity without falling into purely culturalist explanations. As Tosaka Jun has written, “Japaneseness” itself “should be examined as a concrete link in the chain of the international context.”

In this way, linkage-history serves not to displace comparative history but to discipline it, by subjecting comparisons to thorough contextualization. To my mind, this is the single greatest advantage it offers to the field. Easy analogies may misleading, but to eschew comparison altogether would be to adopt a policy of de facto scholarly protectionism, leaving us with no one to talk to but ourselves. Only in dialogue with historians of other places can we fully appreciate what was unusual about Japan’s experience—and grasp the magnitude of Japan’s own contribution to the early modern world.

60. For a richly suggestive essay on the comparability of these processes in Western Europe, Russia, mainland Southeast Asia, and Japan, see Lieberman 1993a, especially pp 521-540. Numerous analysts of early modern Japanese state formation have been struck by the parallels with European absolutism; see for instance Grossberg 1981, Arnason 1988, White 1988.


62. For instance, historians of insular Southeast Asia are quick to point out that not all Asian regimes had the option the Tokugawa exercised of minimizing and controlling European trade. Some were simply too exposed geographically and too dependent on the income from exchange, lacking the sort of intensive agriculture and well-developed internal market that would have been required to survive after rebuffing the military-backed European traders (Reid 1993a, ch. 5). Likewise, historians of the Spanish empire can help us appreciate how singular—and significant—it was that the Japanese had copper to fall back on when their silver reserves ran low (Flynn 1991).


64. It would also, I believe, represent a betrayal of John Hall’s true legacy. While his methodological essays repeatedly caution against the dangers of superficial analogies, those warnings grow out of a long-term engagement with European concepts of feudalism. Likewise, while Hall insists on the uniqueness of Japanese institutions, he manages to describe them in a vocabulary that is readily accessible to non-specialists, as attested by the regularity with which his work is cited in the world networks literature.
Many people in this room may find a world networks agenda less compelling than I do. Sengoku and Tokugawa historians are a diverse lot, and our field is not likely to arrive at a consensus any time soon about what early modernity means. But consensus is not necessary; it may not even be desirable. In the long run, we would probably be better served by a protracted and passionate dispute over our periodization practices—just as European historians have benefitted from the long-running dispute over the seventeenth-century crisis. Although that debate was never resolved, it served a useful function: in the words of Niels Steensgaard, it “demonstrated the interrelations of European history and broke the isolation of national studies. Every Europeanist working on seventeenth-century national history now is aware that his subject is a variation upon a general European theme and reflects and interrelates with developments in the rest of the continent.” If we are lucky, perhaps the present forum will initiate a similar movement in Japanese studies.

In the meantime, I hope this paper has at least established that the debate over periodization is as much about the spatial dimensions of our work as about its temporal boundaries. What Steensgaard has said of the seventeenth-century crisis could equally be said for early modernity: both concepts pose “as much a problem of the space of history as of the time of history.” The challenge I perceive in world networks literature is that of bringing the world back in—and thereby of putting Japanese history firmly on the map of the early modern world. Whether or not my colleagues agree with this particular agenda, I hope they will at least concede with Das Gupta that “it is useful for suspicious people to have some general notions to sharpen their suspicions on, and in the process a measure of understanding is not unlikely.”

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65.. Steensgaard 1990:689.

66.. ibid.; emphasis added.


