



An EAA Interview with 2013 Franklin R. Buchanan Winner Constantine Vaporis

*This is our seventeenth consecutive interview with recipients of the AAS Franklin Buchanan Prize. This year's winner is Constantine Vaporis (PhD, Princeton University), for his outstanding book *Voices of Early Modern Japan: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life during the Age of the Shoguns*. Dr. Vaporis is the Director of Asian Studies and Professor at The University of Maryland, Baltimore County. He teaches Japanese and East Asian History and has received numerous fellowships for research in Japanese history, including a Fulbright Scholar's Award and an NEH Fellowship for College Teachers. In addition to *Voices of Modern Japan*, he is the author of *Breaking Barriers: Travel and the State in Early**

Modern Japan; Tour of Duty: Samurai, Military Service in Edo and the Culture of Early Modern Japan; and Nihonjin to sankin kōtai [The Japanese and Alternate Attendance]. Vaporis was also recently appointed the 2013-2106 UMBC Presidential Research Professor. A review essay of his award winning book accompanies this interview.

Lucien: *Constantine, thank you for doing this interview! In addition to producing a superb pedagogical tool, you've also published extensive scholarship on Tokugawa Japan. What are some of the major factors that stimulated your deep interest in this particular period in Japanese history?*

Constantine Vaporis: It is my honor and pleasure—and thank you for the kind comment about *Voices*. To answer your question, in middle school I had the opportunity to study Japanese from a seminarian, an older student of my father's, who had served in the navy in Japan in the 1950s. We used the *Naganuma* reader and some other textbooks that were produced for GIs serving in Occupation Japan. As a result of this exposure to Japanese, it was not surprising that I developed an interest in Japan itself. Growing up in Boston, we were fortunate to have wonderful Japanese film festivals downtown, and it was there, where I, together with my father and older brother, was able to see dozens and dozens of Japanese film classics over the span of a few years. The period pieces, *jidaigeki*, were my favorites, of course. Of those films, Kobayashi Masaaki's *Harakiri* stands out. It is a brilliant work, just about as perfect a film as one could ever hope to make. As a result, I became "hooked" on the Edo period from a young age. And incidentally, I still teach *Harakiri* and many other films in a course that I've taught for more than twenty years: "From Samurai to Salariman: Japanese History through Film and Literature." In graduate school at Princeton, my very first semester I read Englebert Kaempfer's *A History of Japan* and was overwhelmed by the richness and vibrancy of Edo period life. Kaempfer's account solidified my desire to pursue the study of the Edo period as a scholar, and in it, I discovered the seeds of my two monographs: *Breaking Barriers* and *Tour of Duty*.

Lucien: *I am sure you've taught classes in which students developed problematic prior stereotypes about Tokugawa Japan before meeting you. What are a couple of the most common mistaken notions you encounter about the period that, in your opinion, are most at variance with the historical record; and how, as an instructor, do you address these misconceptions?*

Constantine Vaporis: Probably the two most common problematic stereotypes about Tokugawa Japan remain the notion that Japan was a closed country and that samurai were like the characters we encounter in the film *The Last Samurai* that is, violent men living in the countryside in harmony with the peasant farmers and with nothing to do but practice martial arts and the tea ceremony. It's fairly easy to deal with the second of these—to remedy the ill effects of Hollywood films or anime by having the students read just a few of the documents in *Voices of Early Modern Japan* that deal with the samurai. These documents clarify the idealized role of the

samurai and the contested nature of their relationship with peasants. They also introduce students to some of the social practices (ritual suicide and vengeance killing) for which samurai are best known but which only directly affected a small number of them and allow the students to understand the difficult economic circumstances that samurai in general faced from the early eighteenth century onward.

The first stereotype is more difficult to dispel and requires a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of history. However, it is also a "useful" misconception in that it allows for a discussion about how bias can distort our view of history—in this case by conflating Japan's relations with the Catholic nations of Europe with Japan's relations with the world (particularly Asia). This allows for a discussion of the requirements of state building in a comparative context. It also allows for a discussion of Japan's relations with the various countries in East and Southeast Asia and the different reasons—political, economic, intellectual—why those relations changed over time. Once students realize that Tokugawa authorities did not intend to shut Japan off from the outside world, they are better prepared to understand how it was that a *sakoku*, or "closed-country mentality," developed during the second half of the period and hardened to the point that the official response to the king of Holland's letter to the shōgun in 1844 requesting he "open" the country had to be rejected because of "ancestral law," which it anachronistically dated back to Ieyasu's time.

Lucien: *In addition to the graphics and your lucid contextual and explanatory narrative, the accessibility, variety, and relative brevity of the primary sources you included in *Voices of Early Modern Japan* is most impressive. What were the major challenges and opportunities you encountered when selecting primary sources for the book?*

Constantine Vaporis: Thank you. This book was truly a labor of love. When an editor at ABC-CLIO approached me to submit a book proposal for their *Voices of an Era* series, I jumped at the opportunity. I did so because in teaching the Edo period for more than twenty years, I was continuously frustrated by the lack of a sourcebook that focused on, or primarily on, the seventeenth through mid-nineteenth centuries. Columbia's *The Sources of Japanese Tradition* is a fine collection, but to me, it was heavily weighted in intellectual history and missed the mark in conveying the richness of Tokugawa life that I spoke of above. I wanted to compile a series of documents that focused on Edo culture with a small "c," a one-volume collection of excerpted documents that I hoped would open a window on the period for students and excite them as much as they excited me.

Another opportunity, as I saw it, was the format prescribed for the series. I would not have been so taken by the project were it not for the format you referred to above, which allowed me to contextualize the

documents and offer the reader a kind of roadmap for navigating through them. The requirement to have an “Aftermath” section was also brilliant—too often, document readers simply present the material but give the reader little to no guidance in interpreting or contextualizing it. There was also the opportunity to include some visual materials, though not as many as I would have liked. Finally, my ability to compile the reader was also greatly facilitated by the generosity of the editors of *Monumenta Nipponica*, the fine journal from which many of the translated documents were borrowed.

Well, as you can see, there were many opportunities, but there were also many challenges. Of course, the most basic challenge presented by a single volume with a prescribed word limit was the selection of documents—what to include and what to leave out. It was important to me to compile a stand-alone collection of documents—a single volume of documents of medium length—that a professor could assign for a class, together with a narrative history or series of secondary source articles. So it was essential to include such staple documents as the *Laws for the Military Households* and the so-called “seclusion edicts,” but I did not want simply to collect a series of documents that could already be found in other sourcebooks. I tried to include a good number of documents that even scholars of the Edo period would find refreshing to think about and teach. Once I decided upon the general categories of documents that I was going to use, the challenge was to whittle down the number of potential documents for each section. Selecting the list of sixty documents to include was one of the most difficult parts of the project because in doing so I was defining or shaping the Edo period—or at least presenting my vision of it. The prescribed length of the volume, not to mention copyright law, in many cases limited the amount of the document that could be excerpted, and this forced me to decide what points about the Edo period I hoped a student would glean from a particular document. Lastly, there was the challenge of voice—to make the language of the contextual and explanatory narrative accessible for the target audience of upper-level high school and lower-level university students.

Lucien: *This may be the most difficult question in the interview for you to answer, given the number of attractive potential choices, but please consider the following typical scenario: Presume the typical world history instructor can devote, at most, two hours to the Tokugawa period. If you are that world history teacher, what are examples of two to four primary sources you think are so seminal to understanding the period they should be student readings and/or classroom activities? Please briefly elaborate upon one or more of your selections.*

Constantine Vaporis: What a great question! Actually, this is a question that I posed to my students on their take-home final exam the last time that I taught my course on the Edo period. More specifically, I asked them: “You meet someone who, amazingly, knows nothing about the Tokugawa period, but is anxious to learn about it. You just happen to have a copy of *Voices of Early Modern Japan* in your hands, but your friend is pressed for time, so you can only show him or her four documents. Which four would you pick and why?”

As you might imagine, there were many different answers, and I think that was appropriate. In the students’ responses, however, there were certain clear patterns. First of all, most students selected one or two documents related to the political realm, typically the *Laws for the Military Houses* (*buke shohatto*) and/or one of the documents focusing on foreign relations with the West, such as the “closed country” edicts (1635, 1639) or the letter from a Nagasaki official to the Dutch Governor-general (1642). After that, there was much greater variety in their responses, which tended to reflect their own personal interests. Not to stereotype, but I did find that women in the class tended to pick one of the selections from the domestic sphere more often, being either drawn to the idealized image of a woman’s place as

characterized by the *Onna daigaku* (*Greater Learning for Women*, 1716) or by the discrepancy between legal statute and social practice in terms of divorce or adultery. Others were drawn to the myriad ways in which status (*mibun*) was clarified through dress or social practices like ritual suicide or private vengeance.


Not to evade your question, but I would be hard-pressed to select just two, or even four, that are “seminal.” If you were to select at random one document from four of the seven sections of the book, you would still get a fairly well-rounded view of the Edo period. If push came to shove, though, I would likely pick the above-mentioned *Laws for the Military Houses*, a “closed country” edict, *The Economic Problems Facing the Samurai, as Seen in a Letter from Tani Tannai* (disclosure: I translated this document), and Shikitei Sanba’s *The Women’s Bath*. Of course, I could easily select four others, but these four documents would allow the teacher and his or her students to discuss a number of critical issues in Tokugawa life: the nature of the relationship between the central government of the Tokugawa and the regional rulers, the *daimyo*, that allowed for two and a half centuries of peace; the proclivity of government at all levels to rule through sumptuary legislation and moral exhortation; the hierarchal nature of political life; the restriction of Japan’s relations with the Western world and the reasons for it; the changing economic balance of power between samurai and commoner and the blurring of status divisions; and the vibrancy of commoner culture as seen through popular literature, not to mention the hygienic practices that greatly impacted social and economic life. Having now selected four, I might suggest to the teacher that he or she have the students play a kind of blind-man’s bluff and randomly point to four different documents in four different sections and then have students construct a picture of Edo Japan based simply on them. I think that would be an engaging exercise, and I might try it the next time I teach the course.

Lucien: *Thanks so much for the informative interview! ■*

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