

# An EAA Interview with Professor Steven Ericson on Japan in World History: 1750–1914

*Steven Ericson is an Associate Professor in the Department of History and Chair of the interdisciplinary Asian and Middle Eastern Studies Program at Dartmouth College. He received his BA from Michigan State University and his masters and doctoral degrees from Harvard. At Dartmouth, he teaches a survey of modern Japanese history, upper-level courses on Japan's history since World War II and on imperialism and colonialism in modern East Asia, and seminars on "Shogun and Samurai: Japan in the Age of the Warrior," on popular protest and rebellion in modern East Asia, and on the US occupation of Japan, 1945–1952. He has authored *The Sound of the Whistle: Railroads and the State in Meiji Japan* (Harvard Council on East Asian Studies, 1996) and co-edited, with Allen Hockley, *The Treaty of Portsmouth and Its Legacies* (University Press of New England, 2008). His ongoing research is on the Matsukata financial reform of the 1880s. Of interest to teachers, he has written "The Industrial Revolution in the Twentieth Century, with a Focus on Japan and the East Asian Followers," OAH Magazine of History, 15: Fall 2000, 24–29; "Literature in the Japanese History Classroom," Education About Asia, 6: Spring 2001, 48–51; and, with Mark Jones, "Social and Economic Change in Prewar Japan," in *A Companion to Japanese History*, edited by William M. Tsutsui (Blackwell, 2006).*



**Lucien Ellington:** *Steve, thank you for doing this interview. Would you please share with our readers how you first became interested in Japan, and, more specifically, Japanese history?*

**Steve Ericson:** I was born in Tokyo a month after my parents arrived there as Lutheran missionaries. Two years later, my family moved to Mihara, in Hiroshima Prefecture—a city with a population of about 85,000, whose only Western residents were members of my family and a Belgian priest. We lived there until the mid-sixties, and my mother mostly home-schooled me and my siblings.

During junior and senior high school, I attended Canadian Academy in Kobe (several pioneers of the Japanese history field in North America—E. H. Norman, John Hall, and Donald Shively—were students there before World War II; while at Canadian Academy, I was aware of the name John Hall, but only because he still held the school's long-distance track records!). For much of my time there, I had a history teacher who pushed his students to think critically. He gave interpretive essay exams that were as challenging as any I would encounter in college. He sparked my interest in history, and Japan seemed a natural focus for that interest.

**Lucien Ellington:** *Many of our readers teach world history. Given limited time, content selection is perhaps the paramount problem anyone who teaches world history faces. What are the most important reasons that secondary school and undergraduate world history instructors should pay substantial attention to Japan when teaching the years encompassed in this special section?*

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**Steve Ericson:** As a historian of modern Japan, I'll start with the latter part of the years 1750–1914. After the opening of Japan to growing international contacts from the late 1850s, the country emerged as a major player in East Asian political and economic affairs. By the end of the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, as Britain's ally in East Asia, it had become the regional leader and a world power. Japan was the only non-Western country successfully to begin industrialization and to join the Western imperialist club in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. So the last decade of the Tokugawa period (1600–1868), and the following Meiji era (1868–1912) offer excellent opportunities to compare Japan with both Western nations and Japan's Asian neighbors. The same goes for the preceding century of relative isolation during which a number of political, socioeconomic, and intellectual trends helped pave the way for Japan's rise as a modern nation after 1868.

Another reason to study Japan, particularly in the last four decades of this period, is that those years marked the beginning of massive Japanese emigration to various parts of Asia, the Pacific, and the Amer-

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icas—so Japanese history became even more entangled with the histories of other people in the Asia Pacific region. Also during that time, one can find the roots of estrangement between Japan and the United States leading to war in the Pacific in 1941, as American discrimination against Japanese immigrants mounted, and as the Japanese and Russian governments, after making peace in 1905, concluded a series of treaties aimed at shutting Anglo-American interests out of Manchuria.

From a longer, contemporary perspective—despite the economic problems Japan experienced after 1990, Japan today still has by far the second largest economy in the world in terms of gross domestic product (value of all final goods and services). Though the country gained that position several decades after World War II, in many ways the Tokugawa and Meiji periods laid the groundwork for that achievement.

Finally, after Westerners began to trade more freely with Japan in 1859, they experienced an intense period of Japanese cultural influence, sort of a precursor of the popular J-culture invasion of recent years. In the latter third of the nineteenth century, exports of Japanese art and design, in particular, contributed to the *Japonisme* craze among European and American artists and collectors, and to the rise of modernism, as seen, for example, in the works of James McNeil Whistler and Frank Lloyd Wright.

**Lucien Ellington:** *We all understand that Japan went through enormous changes that began with extensive mid-nineteenth century contacts with the US and other Western powers. What do students need to know about the latter years of the Tokugawa period that will help them better understand subsequent changes that occurred in Japan?*

**Steve Ericson:** After Tashiro Kazui and Ronald Toby began publishing in the 1970s the results of their reexamination of the conventional *sakoku* or “closed country” view of Tokugawa Japan, few Japan scholars continued to subscribe to the notion that the early Tokugawa shogunate adopted a full-fledged seclusion policy, or that Japan, while keeping a tiny window open at Nagasaki, basically shut itself off from the outside world. Japan may have been largely closed to the West, but it remained fairly open to other parts of Asia. This situation was especially true in the seventeenth century, when the shogunate established diplomatic relations with Korea and the Ryūkyū Kingdom and permitted extensive trade with them. It also pursued indirect trade with China, through the Satsuma and Tsushima domains (as well as with the Ainu lands to the north, through the Matsumae domain), besides dealing directly with Chinese and Dutch traders at Nagasaki. During that century, Japan exported massive amounts of silver and copper to pay for such imports as silk and ginseng. When the output of the metal mines began to decline and Japan fell into a currency crisis, the shogunate clamped down on silver and copper exports and pursued a strategy of import substitution by promoting domestic production of silk and ginseng, among other items. Consequently, by the mid-eighteenth century, Japan had become relatively more isolated, even from the rest of Asia.

On the other hand, in 1720, the shogunate removed an earlier ban

on the import of Western books as long as they didn’t deal with Christianity, and by the late eighteenth century, many scholars were actively studying Western medicine and science through books brought in by the Dutch. Furthermore, through most of the Tokugawa period the shogunate received detailed reports on contemporary developments worldwide from successive directors of the Dutch trading post. This prior knowledge and appreciation of Western science and technology, and of current events overseas, set the stage for Japan’s vigorous pursuit of “knowledge from all over the world” (Article 5 of the 1868 Imperial Charter Oath) following the Meiji Restoration.

Another trend with implications for the Japanese response to the challenges of the mid-nineteenth century was that Japan, which had always been reluctant to become a tributary of China, clearly distanced itself from the Sino-centric world order during the Tokugawa era. As a result, when that order collapsed in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Japan, as Ronald Toby puts it, was freer to act than such dedicated participants as Korea.

Another difference between Japan and China, in particular, had to do with their emperor systems. Whereas the Chinese emperor, as the Son of Heaven (in a cosmic sense), had a conditional mandate to rule and could lose that right in the event of political upheaval or natural disaster, the Japanese emperor, as supposedly the biological descendant of the Sun Goddess, had an unconditional mandate. Although people who ruled in the emperor’s name—whether court nobles or warriors—could fall from power, the reigning emperor theoretically could not. Therefore, when the imperial court resurfaced as a politically important player on the turbulent late Tokugawa scene, Japan’s emperor could serve as a rallying point for a nascent nationalism, and be a stabilizing force in regime change, something China’s emperor, with his conditional mandate (and, in the case of the Manchu dynasty, his alien origins), simply could not do.

The nature of the ruling class in Tokugawa Japan also gave it comparative advantages. By the end of the Tokugawa period, the relationship between domain lords and their samurai vassals had become increasingly impersonal, as the daimyō had earlier converted most of their retainers from fief-holders into salaried officials, removing them from the land and bringing them into castle towns. So, while the political system remained largely feudal at the top, with some 260 daimyō receiving confirmation of their positions in return for pledging allegiance to the Tokugawa, rule within the domains, including the Tokugawa super-domain, became more and more bureaucratic, a trend that likely facilitated the creation of a modern bureaucratic government after 1868. Moreover, once the new Meiji regime bought off the daimyō, Japan had little in the way of a landed aristocracy that was resistant to fundamental changes in land tenure and the like. On the other hand, members of Tokugawa Japan’s ruling class were still warriors (for all their resemblance to Maytag repairmen—as John Hall used to say—waiting for a war that never came over the course of more than two centuries of rel-

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Yokohama became a “boomtown” when it was designated as the first Japanese city open to foreigners after 200 years of isolation.

Image source: MIT Visualizing Cultures Web site at [http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/yokohama/yb\\_visnav01.html](http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/yokohama/yb_visnav01.html). From the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution catalog, *Yokohama: Prints from 19th-Century Japan*, by Ann Yonemura. © 1990 Smithsonian Institution.

ative peace). And historians of Japan often point out that, unlike the scholar officials who ruled China and Korea, Japan’s samurai rulers thought first in terms of defending their land, rather than their culture, against the Western imperialist powers, and, as military men, were quick to recognize the superiority of Western military technology.

One of the most striking developments of late Tokugawa was the raft of changes that took place in Japan’s domestic economy. By the end of the period, Japan had undergone a veritable commercial revolution with the emergence of a money economy, a proto-national market, and a range of sophisticated financial services, in good part because daimyō had to convert tax rice into cash to meet the costs of the alternate attendance system. In the last century of Tokugawa, the most dramatic changes occurred in the countryside, as farmers increasingly engaged in cash cropping and proto-industrial production of cotton cloth and other handicrafts, often for sale in distant markets. Besides providing capital accumulation for modern industrial development after 1868, the dynamic agricultural sector also furnished a wealth of human capital. Members of Japan’s overwhelmingly rural population had both relatively high literacy rates (thanks to an expanding network of schools in late Tokugawa), and skills of a cottage-industry variety that they could apply fairly readily to modern factory production, especially in the textile industry, the leading sector of Meiji industrialization.

One shouldn’t underestimate the obstacles to modern economic development that Meiji Japan had to overcome, as Henry Rosovsky suggested in a classic article in a volume he edited, titled *Industrialization in Two Systems* (1966). Yet clearly, the modern economy inherited a number of assets from late Tokugawa, as Sydney Crawcour, for instance, argued in an article on “Japan’s Preparation for Modern Economic Growth” in the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Japanese Studies* (1974).

**Lucien Ellington:** *What do you think is most important for world history students to know about economic, political, and social developments during the Meiji period?*

**Steve Ericson:** I think the most important economic development dur-

ing Meiji was that Japan formed the basis for an industrial revolution relying mainly on internal resources from agriculture and traditional industry, and with hardly any foreign capital until late in the period. I would say “basis” because Meiji Japan really saw only the beginnings of modern industrial growth, the speed and scale of which we often tend to exaggerate during that era. It probably wasn’t until World War I that the country actually went into industrial overdrive. Until then, traditional cottage industries, rather than modern factories, produced more than half of total industrial output, and, unlike the case of most Western industrial latecomers, the traditional sector in Japan continued to expand until the 1920s. Still, the Meiji era was a critical formative period during which Japan created a modern legal, communications, and financial infrastructure, imported and adapted industrial technology from the West, and made breakthroughs in key sectors ranging from cotton spinning to steel and chemicals.

In the political sphere, I would say the most salient development was that Japan laid the foundation for both authoritarian and representative government during the Meiji period. The Meiji leaders centralized rule by abolishing the semi-autonomous daimyō domains and establishing a national tax; created a powerful modern bureaucracy and military; reinvented the emperor as a focus of nationalism and obedience to the state; and, under the 1889 constitution, entrusted almost all powers to the emperor and, by extension, to themselves as his appointed ministers. They also gave the military considerable autonomy from civilian control, a provision that would have dire consequences in the lead-up to the Pacific War. On the other hand, the localities also had a say in government, at first through prefectural assemblies that the Meiji regime set up in 1878, and then increasingly through the Diet or national parliament, which opened under the new constitution in 1890. Local representatives in the Diet were able to use that body’s budgetary power to secure pork barrel for their constituents and growing influence over the cabinet and bureaucracy, paving the way for de facto party rule in the interwar years and genuine parliamentary government after World War II.

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Socially, the most significant development was not so much the abolition of the Tokugawa class system, since class lines were already blurring in late Tokugawa whereas samurai background continued to matter well into Meiji, as it was the establishment of compulsory primary education and a modern school system. The new educational regime offered commoners an avenue for upward mobility, playing a central role in the emergence of a new middle class in urban areas from late Meiji, while establishing a meritocratic, examination-driven system that has largely continued to this day.

**Lucien Ellington:** *Japan also became an imperial power during the years under discussion here. How might world history instructors better enable students to make sense out of this event?*

**Steve Ericson:** The standard interpretation is that Japan joined the Western imperialist club mainly for strategic or defensive reasons—to avoid becoming a colony itself or “the main course” instead of “a guest at the table,” as one Meiji politician put it in 1884—as well as for political reasons: to gain status and recognition as a modern, “civilized” nation, one of whose requisites seemed to be possession of an empire. In the past couple of decades, scholars have brought economics more fully into the picture, focusing, for instance, on the activities of Japanese shipping and trading companies that aggressively sought out business opportunities in East Asia. Peter Duus’ argument that the Meiji state, rather than private business, took the lead in securing economic concessions on the continent, and that it did so with the preemptive goal of reserving areas for future economic exploitation, remains influential, though.

One view of the origins of Meiji imperialism is that Japan practically stumbled into empire after the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895—or, as the Japanese foreign minister at the time claimed, it was simply responding to “various unexpected happenings”—and that the country acquired its first colony, Taiwan, almost as an afterthought, in 1895. Recent scholarship, however, has located the beginnings of Japanese expansionism much earlier, for example, in an abortive plan to colonize Taiwan at the time of Japan’s punitive expedition to that island in 1874, and, even further back, in Tokugawa dealings with the Ainu lands. In any case, a major motivator of Japanese imperialist action in the Meiji period was the threat of Western domination, especially from the 1880s, when the European powers launched into the heightened rivalry of the “new imperialism” and a more predatory, Social Darwinian worldview took hold in Japan. I think we sometimes forget that, even as Japan was becoming a treaty power in China and was largely rounding out its formal empire by annexing Korea in 1910, it was still technically a semi-colony. The last pillar of the unequal treaties that the Western powers had imposed on Japan in 1858, low fixed tariffs, didn’t fall until 1911.

**Lucien Ellington:** *A world history pedagogical strategy that seems to be resurgent these days is the use of biographical vignettes of significant individuals from different backgrounds as a medium to assist students in understanding larger economic, military, political, and social developments. What Japanese from these years might you recommend whose lives would both be interesting to students and help to illumine larger historical developments?*

**Steve Ericson:** For works on political figures, one possibility is the translation of a historical novel by the popular narrative historian Shiba Ryōtarō, *The Last Shogun: The Life of Tokugawa Yoshinobu* (Kodansha, 1998). We also have lively portraits of Saigō Takamori, the leader of the Satsuma Rebellion of 1877, in Ivan Morris, *The Nobility of Failure* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), and, more recently, in Mark Ravina, *The Last Samurai* (Wiley, 2004); of the two most powerful early Meiji leaders, Kido Kōin and Ōkubo Toshimichi, in Albert Craig and Donald Shively, eds., *Personality in Japanese History* (University of California, 1970); and of the “father of the constitution” Itō Hirobumi and “champion of democracy” Ōkuma Shigenobu in Yoshitake Oka, *Five Political Leaders of Modern Japan* (University of Tokyo, 1986). Useful for social and economic developments during the Tokugawa-Meiji transition are the autobiographies of the leading popularizer of Western knowledge in Meiji, Fukuzawa Yukichi (Columbia University, 2007), and of the “Johnny Appleseed of Meiji Capitalism” (to quote Peter Duus), Shibusawa Eiichi (University of Tokyo, 1994); also of interest is Haru Matsukata Reischauer, *Samurai and Silk* (Harvard University, 1986), a dual biography of the author’s grandfathers, Matsukata Masayoshi, finance minister for much of the Meiji period, and Arai Ryōichirō, a prominent silk trader.

On the lives of more “ordinary” Japanese men and women during these years, one could recommend *Musui’s Story: The Autobiography of a Tokugawa Samurai* (University of Arizona, 1988); Anne Walthall, *The Weak Body of a Useless Woman: Matsuo Taseko and the Meiji Restoration* (University of Chicago, 1998); Edwin McClellan, *Woman in the Crested Kimono: The Life of Shibue Io and Her Family* (Yale University, 1985); several of the portraits in Anne Walthall, ed., *The Human Tradition in Modern Japan* (Scholarly Resources, 2002); and a forthcoming book by Simon Partner, *Silk and Soil: A Japanese Villager and His Community, 1865–1925* (University of California, 2009).

**Lucien Ellington:** *Thank you so much for the interview, Steve. ■*

### STEVE ERICSON’S SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

The Japanese history field is now crowded with excellent surveys. Two eminently concise and accessible works that might be appropriate for a general course on East Asia are Albert Craig, *The Heritage of Japanese Civilization* (Prentice Hall, 2002; 173 pages) and Anne Walthall, *Japan: A Cultural, Social, and Political History* (Houghton Mifflin, 2005; 224 pages). The entry with the richest detail on both Tokugawa and Meiji is surely James McClain, *Japan: A Modern History* (Norton, 2002; 632 pages). James Huffman has a forthcoming survey titled *Japan in World History*, which will appear in a new Oxford University series on global history. For primary readings, the best collection is Wm. Theodore de Bary, Carol Gluck, and Arthur E. Tiedemann, comps., *Sources of Japanese Tradition, 1600 to 2000*, vol. 2, second edition (Columbia University, 2005).