

Voices of Early Modern Japan

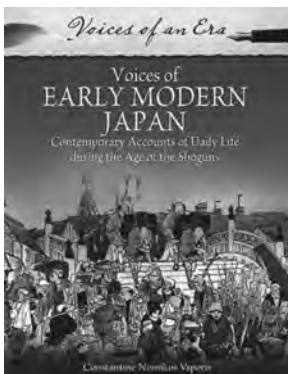
Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life During the Age of the Shoguns

BY CONSTANTINE VAPORIS

WESTPORT: GREENWOOD PUBLISHING GROUP, 2012

273 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0313392009, HARDBACK

Editor's Note: This book is now also available in paperback through Westview Press, ISBN: 978-0813349008.



Reviewed by Kathleen Krauth

We live in an age in which most K-16 educators are required to do more, are held accountable for doing more, and are “rewarded” less and less. The increasing demands for more content (but what?), more skills (which ones?), and better display of “mastery” in ever-changing and higher stakes assessments distract us, at times, from the basic goals of education. To return to those goals and balance the content with skills seem increasingly difficult. Constantine Nomikos Vaporis’s new book, *Voices of Early Modern Japan: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life*

Because of the many topics Vaporis includes, the possibilities for comparisons across regions and time periods are many: marriage, discrimination, recreation, religion, and politics, to name just a few.

During the Age of the Shoguns, is a remarkable work in that it not only offers educators many topics and themes from the early modern era of Japan but also emphasizes how to read and understand a primary document. Because Vaporis’s text successfully presents content and skills, it serves as a model of how to meet the many demands of our jobs.

High school and postsecondary teachers of Japan and Asia will find this book valuable for their teaching. The introductory essay in and of itself is an excellent explanation of the complexities and developments of the 268-year period of early modern Japanese history. Of course, the most important component of the book is the primary documents, and because of the intelligent selection of the sixty documents, Vaporis has made the Tokugawa period more accessible for students. The many and varied voices included in these documents give humanity to a time and place that often seem distant and irrelevant to students, and because of their brevity, students can more actively engage with the themes and developments of Edo Japan. For example, there are many different documents that address the theme of control. One such document is the *Prohibitions of 1615*, where “shaving far too much of the hair off the top of the head, wearing one’s hair slicked back with oil or having the sideburns meet as a mustache” were restricted by the government. Instead of passively transcribing the idea of shogunate control into their notes from a reading or lecture, students can consider these specific attempts to control appearance, the reasons behind these attempts, and the extent to which they may or may have not been followed. Combined with many other documents addressing this same theme, students will have a much fuller understanding of Tokugawa society.

In fact, in many ways, this book challenges simplistic thinking about the past. One overly simplified and often-misunderstood part of this period of Japanese history is the relationship between the emperor and the shogun. Vaporis includes documents that show even foreigners at the time confused the two leaders and their functions. To understand the role of the emperor as the legitimizing power but subordinate to the shogun is not easy, and Vaporis addresses this relationship by including the document *Regulations for the Imperial Palace and the Court Nobility*, which states, “The emperor is to be engaged in the arts, the first of which is scholarship.” The *Regulations* go on to detail what the emperor’s ceremonial robes should look like. This document raises questions about the position and power of the emperor and changes in this position over time. Although the emperor did not wield any political power during this period, is that true for all periods? How could the emperor be “restored” to power in the Meiji period if he didn’t have power in the Tokugawa period? All of the primary documents raise further questions and promote deeper thinking of the past to more adequately prepare students for the world they are living in and will face in the future.

Although the content is limited to one country in one era, Vaporis’s selection and framework for understanding these primary documents makes the book helpful to teachers outside the area of Asia, especially World History and AP World History teachers. Because of the many topics Vaporis includes, the possibilities for comparisons across regions and time periods are many: marriage, discrimination, recreation, religion, and politics, to name just a few. Comparing dowry practices across early modern societies allows students to make connections not possible by studying a single

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Figure 4 on page 38 of *Visions of Early Modern Japan* with the following caption: "Seven Years of Kaei (1854) *daishoreki* [Samurai in Armor]." (By permission of the National Diet Library.)

country. In truth, I generally dislike comparisons across time because students' thinking tends toward the ahistorical in too many ways, but the manner in which Vaporis has organized and framed the documents makes the across-time comparisons meaningful and surprisingly relevant. For example, one of the questions Vaporis asks regarding the restrictions on samurai hairstyles in the *Prohibitions of 1615* is to consider those institutions in modern society that regulate hairstyle and their reasons for this regulation. Considering this issue in their own time and own society gives students new conceptual frameworks, connections, and understandings of the past *and* present.

Unlike most other texts written by scholars, Vaporis never loses sight of the importance of translating the content of these documents into *effective and meaningful* learning for students.

Vaporis constructs a set of seven questions to ask of every document, and those seven questions are worth the entire cost of the book alone. They will definitely be on my wall during the upcoming year for my high school students from ninth to twelfth grade to consider every day. In addition to these general questions, each of the sixty primary documents includes an insightful introduction, related content points, vocabulary, probing and intelligent questions to consider when reading the document, and further information for more complete understanding after having read the document. This framework is consistent throughout; the book actually emphasizes critical thinking strategies that can be useful to any historical or contemporary text.

Voices of Early Modern Japan: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life During the Age of the Shoguns is not appropriate for all K-16 educators—it isn't meant to be—but it is definitely workable from seventh grade through the early years of college. Obviously for the seventh to ninth grades, the book can't be used completely, but the documents and frameworks for reading them lend themselves to many lessons and courses, even those not directly related to early modern Japan or Asia. Students in high school, community college, and introductory first and second-year courses can extend their core content learning while attaining the skills of reading and understanding primary documents and making connections across time and space.

And the objective—the most basic objective in all social studies classrooms—must be to prepare students for their roles as citizens in an increasingly complex, constantly changing world. Constantine Nomikos Vaporis's new book can help us teach students how to read and think more critically; and that is one step, and not a small one, forward. ■

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