

Introduction

著者	BOOT W. J., SHIRAHATA Yozaburo
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Introduction

The present volume contains twelve papers, six of which deal with Japan between 1600 and 1868, and six, with the Netherlands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They are the result of a conference, held in Leiden from October 27 till 29, 1999, which was part of a series of three, organised by the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in collaboration with the universities of Sheffield, Leuven, and Leiden. The choice of the theme of the Leiden conference was partly inspired by the commemoration of four hundred years of relations between Japan and the Netherlands, which were to be celebrated in the year 2000. If that would have been our only consideration, however, we would have settled for such more obvious subjects as the trade of the East-Indian Company with Japan, the settlement on Deshima, and Rangaku. We decided not to do that, but instead to bring together a number of experts in the field of the pre-modern history of the Netherlands and of Japan. The leading thought was to explore to what extent interesting and meaningful comparisons could be made between two such completely different countries as the Netherlands and Japan in the pre-modern period.

A second objective was to contribute towards the integration of Japanese and European, i.c. Dutch historical scholarship. Although Japanese historians believe and do more or less the same things as their European colleagues, and we have little to teach each other in regard to methodological awareness or technical skills, still knowledge of what the colleagues on the other side of Russia are actually working on is extremely limited. Not quite two different worlds, but close to it. Feudalism is a good example. It existed both in Japan and in Europe, and at least since Marc Bloch's *La société féodale* (1939-1940) and L.F. Ganshof's *Qu'est-ce que la féodalité* (1944), it has been *bon ton* to acknowledge this fact in a few brief paragraphs. Nevertheless, though the issue has been on the table for all these many years, still no systematic, comparative treatment of European and Japanese feudalism has appeared. Urban studies might be cited as another example. Urbanization was a process that occurred both in Japan and in Europe. Nevertheless, even such a valuable work as *Edo & Paris. Urban Life and the State in the Early Modern Era* (James L. McClain, John M. Merriman, & Ugawa Kaoru, eds, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994) has barely scratched the surface, and is lacking especially where the integration of approaches and the systematic exploration of identical problem areas are concerned.

There are, of course, good reason for this state of affairs. Language forms a

major obstacle. Yet, there is by now quite a number of English-language publications available on, e.g., "Japanese feudalism," written by both western and Japanese experts; anyone who is interested can read up on the subject, and would know whom to invite for his next symposium on comparative feudalism. On the Japanese side, the situation is more or less the same: a fair number of the major works on European history, especially those that also contained methodological innovations, has been translated into Japanese. Most of these publications, however, tend to remain sequestered in the field of Japanese studies (in the west), or the separate fields of English, German, French, or Russian history (in Japan).

We seem to be confronted, therefore, with something more basic, which is a fundamental lack of interest in each other's subject matter. Fortunately, we are not the only ones who deplore this situation and are looking for ways to change it. In a recent review, Ann Waswo wrote that the book she was reviewing might at least have the beneficial result of raising an interest in Japan with the "specialists in the 'mainstream' subjects of Western universities (who still tend to ignore Japan because its development and culture are assumed to be unique and hence irrelevant to their concerns)." (*Monumenta Nipponica* 54, 1 [1999], p. 133) One would want to elicit a similar interest in western history, culture and society from Japanese experts in the "mainstream subjects" of the Japanese scholarly world.

From all the examples we could take, let us, for the sake of argument, consider the hypothetical case of a Japanese historian who is specialized in Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542-1616) and who has taken an interest in Prince William of Orange (1533-1584)—no mean feat in itself! He will discover that in order to do any serious reading he will have to learn Dutch. He can try to follow the easy way and ask around amongst his Dutch colleagues, but then he will discover that they assume a familiarity with facts and historiographical discussions that he does not possess. The question is, what incentives do we have in order to make him persevere in the face of such obvious problems. Obviously, that reliable knowledge of William of Orange will help him in his own research regarding Tokugawa Ieyasu.

The usual supposition would be that by comparing these two leaders-of-men and builders-of-states one would at some meta-level arrive at a better understanding of their typical prototype, "A Charismatic Leader of Men." Understanding of the prototype would in turn contribute to a fuller understanding of the individual instances.

Is this true? Apart from the practical problem of how one does arrive at the prototype from individual instances (by a process of adding, a process of subtracting, or a process of inspired improvisation?), the science of history is little interested in such prototypes as "A Leader." It is more interested in finding out what exactly happened to make this specific person into a leader of men, and what exactly he did to earn him that title. The stress is on the word "exactly," not on the general conceptual categories.

Could not our hypothetical Japanese historian with his uncharacteristic interest in William of Orange rather be swayed by the purely technical aspects of his colleagues work? Would he not feel a professional interest in seeing how a fellow craftsman lays out his tools and handles his materials? Less metaphorically: Any historian would be interested to hear what kind of sources his colleague has to wrestle with and how these are arranged. Are there diaries? Are they of any use? How revealing are the letters? Has the lot of them been printed, or only a selection, and does he have to work his way through a number of archives in order to find the rest? How reliable is the reporting by contemporaries? Is there an antecedent biographical tradition? What kind of stereotypes do you find there? And if we are talking biography, there are also a number of notorious universals. How far does one get with Freudian claims regarding the importance of childhood experiences and a stable family life? How does one handle the always tricky problem of constructing one convincing image from a variety of disparate sources? How does one define "convincing" anyhow? As plausible in a psychological sense? Whose psychology? Does one have to be "convincing" at all? Should one not rather present the materials as they are, with all their inconsistencies and lacunae? How does one handle the problem of focus? Must one focus on the "hero" and condemn all those surrounding him to supporting roles, or is there a rhetorically satisfactory way to give due weight to their relative power and influence?

Questions galore, that warrant dipping into streams that have sprung from a different historiographical tradition. One's own tradition is too familiar. Abundant occasion, also, for talking shop. Which is, in the end, what we tried to encompass with our symposium.

The procedure by which we put together the symposium was rather mechanical in its conception: we chose a number of subjects, partly because of their intrinsic interest, partly in view of the specialties of prospective participants, and tried to pair off one Dutch and one Japanese participant for each subject. The subjects chosen were education, medicine, printing and publishing, life histories, prostitution, and the

preservation of public order.

We have grouped the articles two by two, each dealing with the same subject in Japan and in the Netherlands. Anyone who takes the trouble to read the contributions, will notice that this mechanical procedure breaks down almost immediately. Even when two contributions are on the same subject, e.g., books and printing, there is still a great difference between the aspects the two authors have chosen to take up. The bright side is, that what the volume loses in consistency, it makes up in variety, and that this volume in itself is proof, that there is still ample room for further symposia.

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W.J. BOOT

SHIRAHATA Yōzaburō