

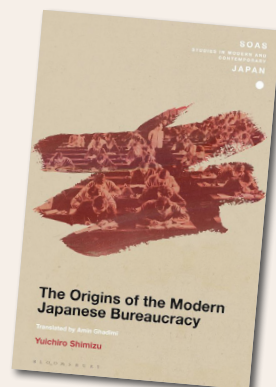
BOOK REVIEW

The Origins of the Modern Japanese Bureaucracy

By Yuichiro Shimizu. Translated by Amin Ghadimi

Bloomsbury Academic / SOAS Studies in Modern and Contemporary Japan, 2019
288 pages.

Reviewed by Andrew LEVIDIS*



In *The Origins of the Modern Japanese Bureaucracy*, Yuichiro Shimizu has written a meditation on meritocracy and political power, and an unashamed paean to the bureaucratic elite who forged the modern Japanese nation-state. Using the early-Meiji ideal of *rishshin shusse* or “rising through the world by autonomous will” (p. 2) as his organizing concept, Shimizu explores changing notions of the self and individual success in the Meiji and Taishō eras. The book takes us through a kaleidoscope of institutions, committees, and bureaucratic titles, immersing us in a world of officialdom populated by a rich cast of characters whose lives and careers Shimizu documents sympathetically, and at length. At its heart, this is a work on the relationship between individuals and institutions, between ambition and the systems which enable and curtail it, although the historical contingency of these ideas remains unexamined here.

Positioning the bureaucracy at the center of social and political transformations after the 1868 Meiji Restoration, Shimizu highlights the range of forces that led to the development of constitutional politics. Yet it is the book’s arguments on the temporal experience of Japanese modernization and modernity that are the most controvertible. In a Weberian turn, Shimizu shifts the focus from economic processes and bourgeois order to the agents and institutions of the modern state. His argument begins as follows: the Five Point Charter Oath, which promised “all shall be allowed to pursue their own calling so that there may be no discontent” (p. 23), inaugurated a fundamental break with Tokugawa status society, sweeping aside centuries of restraint to self-development and the maximization of human talent.

This argument is developed over six dense chapters that take in nearly seventy years of nineteenth and early-twentieth century history. Chapters 1 and 2 trace the Tokugawa-Meiji transition. As they razed the offices of the *bakuban* system—shogunate, regency, and chancellorship—Meiji leaders embraced a participatory model of governance guided by public debate (*kōgi*) to win over, and later subordinate, domainal authorities. A meritocratic

* Andrew Levidis is a Lecturer in Modern Japanese History at the Australian National University with broad interests in intellectual and political history, international history, and twentieth century East Asia.

recruitment system (*chōshi seido*) for official appointments was implemented to concentrate human resources into the central government.

To realize the promise of the Five-Point Charter Oath, the fledgling Meiji regime developed ambitious plans for education, but initial efforts to cultivate human talent were fraught. The academy quickly became a proxy for tensions over the ethics and scholastic regimen (Western, national, or Chinese) suited to the needs of bureaucratic and political careers. Juxtaposing a series of vignettes with reflections on state and education, Shimizu provides new insights into the process of elite socialization. He documents how distinction and social status based on academic competition were consciously cultivated to foster a cohort of male students welded together by elitism, fraternal camaraderie, and study abroad experiences.

Chapters 3 and 4 serve as a bridge between the early Meiji executive state and the constitutional politics of the Taishō era. The 1870s and 1880s were a period of experimentation as the Meiji regime emerged from crises in 1873 and 1881 transformed: national leadership was consolidated, and a new centralized structure of coordination inaugurated, the centerpiece of which was the Home Ministry (Naimushō) and a nascent cabinet system. To steer “philippic” (p. 112) youth of the 1880s away from the Popular Rights Movement, an examination-based probationary employment system (*shiho seido*) was inaugurated, expanding channels for youthful aspirants to the highest posts in government. Finally, a Prussian-style constitutional monarchy (*rikken kunshu sei*) was adopted to ensure the supremacy of the executive.

In chapters 5 and 6, Shimizu situates the emergence of a new generation of administrative officials, known as examination bureaucrats, within the advance of party government. Through the Keien era (1901–1913) of alternating cabinets organized under the leadership of Saionji Kinmochi or Katsura Tarō, political parties extended their influence into the central ministries, developing working relationships with the nonparty elite, most consequentially the House of Peers and senior statesmen (*genrō*). Likewise, high officials with political aspirations informally affiliated with mainstream parties (Seiyūkai or Dōshikai, later Kenseikai and Minseitō) accelerating the politicization of state officialdom. Unlike their oligarchic rivals, the examination bureaucrats viewed parties as integral to the proper functioning of the Meiji constitutional order: exam bureaucrats made their peace with the parties to weaken restoration officials’ cliques (*hanbatsu*), and used party affiliation to limit partisan influence over personnel decisions and ministerial affairs.

The Origins of the Modern Japanese Bureaucracy ends inconclusively in the years around World War I as *risshin shusse* ebbed into social stratification and the bureaucracy hardened into a new hierarchy based on performance in the higher civil service examination, judicious marriage, and administrative specialization. It is a strange terminus, more so when one considers the tremendous transformations in outlook and relationship between parties and bureaucracy with passage of the manhood suffrage act in 1925. Yet, it is precisely the complexities and ambivalences of the 1920s that raise important questions about the author’s assumptions and some of his conclusions.

My principal objections to Shimizu’s work center on two points: transcendentalism (*chōzenshugi*) and empire. In a suggestive conclusion, Shimizu contends the decline of party influence in the 1930s was the result of “bureaucrats who lost sight of the lessons of Meiji Japan” (p. 239). Beyond the obvious objections, this perspective takes for granted the notion

that parties are a necessary component of constitutional politics. In late nineteenth-century Japan, the ambivalent attitudes held by oligarchic politicians around Prince Yamagata Aritomo towards parties reflected a view of empire, constitutionalism, and faction in which the “scourge of partisanship” (p. 238) was damaging to government. Politically, these men adhered to a transcendentalist position which held political life could develop without parties, and government should remain neutral and above private interests. In his failure to take this antiparty position seriously, Shimizu underestimates the grip a refurbished transcendentalism had on bureaucratic thought and conservative ideologies into the 1920s and 1930s. When Hoshino Naoki, who would become the chief civilian administrator of Manchukuo, witnessed the burning of pro-Katsura newspapers during the Taishō crisis in 1912, what he saw was not a new era of party government, but how extreme partisanship can degenerate into violent strife and disorder (p. 226).

The Meiji regime fostered notions of honor, the spirit of competition, and a desire for personal preeminence. These produced not just a constitutional state, but a powerful empire. In conflating personal with national ambition, Shimizu seeks to avoid uncomfortable questions about the relationship between empire and the institutions and ideologies of bureaucracy. Empire is not so easily banished, however. We catch glimpses of it in oblique discussions of the popularity of courses on colonial governance at the imperial universities (p. 210); or in reference to elite students eager to depart the metropolitan core and enter the government-generals of Korea and Taiwan. Yet the author never really comes to grips with the role these imperial domains played as a testing ground for modern conceptions of governance. Nor does he seriously consider colonial institutions such as the South Manchuria Railway Company as formative sites for training elite bureaucrats and researchers, many of whom went on to play major roles in the wartime empire and post-1945 Japanese state. Finally, Shimizu makes no effort to illustrate how development of the modern bureaucracy was enmeshed in various geopolitical reorientations conditioned by two major wars (Sino-Japanese, Russo-Japanese).

Yuichiro Shimizu is a gifted writer and the translation by Amin Ghadimi is elegant, lucidly rendered, and skillfully sustained. Despite my reservations, *The Origins of the Modern Japanese Bureaucracy* is a sophisticated piece of historical research that recasts key questions about the bureaucracy and constitutional politics in Meiji and Taishō Japan. It is a work which will be of undoubted interest to historians of political and intellectual history, one which forces us to reckon anew with meritocracy in modern Japanese history.