

BOOK REVIEW

Land, Power, and the Sacred: The Estate System in Medieval Japan

Edited by Janet R. Goodwin
and Joan R. Piggott

University of Hawai'i Press, 2018
xxxvii + 532 pages.

Reviewed by Jason MORGAN



There are some excellent studies in English and other Western languages on premodern Japanese history—the works of Martin Collcutt, Mary Elizabeth Berry, and Herman Ooms come immediately to mind. But researching the distant Japanese past remains daunting for many. A formidable challenge facing anyone who would study premodern Japan is the “estates,” or *shōen*. The *shōen* were owned by (usually) off-site landlords who delegated the actual day-to-day running of the estates to various stewards, reeves, and overseers. These, in turn, managed the peasants who worked the paddies and fields. They also procured the materials needed for efficient operation, ensured that produce went smoothly to market and proceeds duly returned, commissioned security details to keep the peace, and stood firm against predatory neighbors. Adding to this complexity was the practice of *shiki*, schema for apportioning yields and keeping track of the diverse patterns of landownership, and the value that they brought to powerful holding families. The *shōen* were at the very heart of the medieval Japanese economy and social array, and yet they are so manifold and convoluted that understanding them is no small task.

To the rescue now springs Janet R. Goodwin and Joan R. Piggott’s new edited volume, which is sure to be the classic work on the subject for years to come. Combining some of the best Japanese scholarship with new research in English, *Land, Power, and the Sacred* is a major resource on the *shōen* and a most welcome addition to the literature on premodern Japan overall. Edited volumes are often difficult to read, and even harder to review. This one, though, is a delight of thematic consistency balanced with compelling detail. Goodwin and Piggott have so expertly streamlined the overall volume that it reads almost monographically. There are no weak essays here.

After Piggott’s very helpful overview of estates and Sakurai Eiji’s essay on “medieval Japan’s commercial economy and the estate system” (p. 37; part 1), part 2 begins with Nishida Takeshi’s hands-on investigation of the archaeological record from the Ōbe estate (in modern-day Hyōgo Prefecture), which belonged to Tōdaiji in Nara. Here we meet the monk Chōgen. Monks, often especially adept managers and businessmen, were typically the engines behind estate maintenance and growth. The next chapter focuses on Ōbe as seen through documents. Here, Endō Motoo brings to life the day-to-day, year-to-year workings of both the grand Tōdaiji Temple and its various holdings throughout Japan. (Chōgen

is back on stage in this chapter, too.) The last chapter in part 2 shifts focus to the Hine estate in Izumi (present-day Osaka), owned by the Kujō, a powerful regent family. Hirota Kōji reminds us here that archaeology and documents are complementary, and must be supplemented with fieldwork in order to get a feel for the lay of the land.

Kimura Shigemitsu begins part 3, “Making the Land Productive,” by arguing that focusing on labor is a good way to overcome unhelpful dichotomies, such as between “rice and nonrice agriculture,” and between mountain and plains communities (pp. 143–44). Labor, Kimura reminds us, also includes fishing, salt manufacturing, silkworm raising, and other estate-based activities. In the next chapter, Joan R. Piggott takes up Kimura’s challenge to focus on logging and the process of clearing land for cultivation. Piggott foregrounds here a major theme of this volume, namely that the medieval period was a time of “fierce competition among court nobles in the capital, middling officials of various sorts, and locals who wanted to secure greater profits from the soil” (p. 164).

Part 4, “Secular and Sacred,” opens with Nagamura Makoto’s intriguing contrast between the estate management styles of *hijiri*, or religious freelancers, and temple monks like Chōgen. In the various clashes among the holy men, we encounter *gōso*, the showdown between different deities who were (invisibly) mounted on carriages and delivered to the enemy’s temple for spiritual battle. Chōgen returns in the chapter by Ōyama Kyōhei, who skillfully weaves together the secular and the devotional to show how religious practices undertaken by manager-monks overlapped with material benefits for local communities. The next chapter, by Janet R. Goodwin, again features Chōgen, whose management of the Ōbe estate was a delicate balancing act among donors, power brokers, local bigwigs, and the surrounding estates and their vested interests. Yoshiko Kainuma then shifts to the “Jōdoji Amida Triad,” the splendid tri-figure Buddhist statue sculpted by Kaikei (active ca. 1189–1236) to point up the intersection of iconography and theology with the realities of temple building and estate management. (The Amida Triad at Jōdoji Temple is, incidentally, one of the many excellent color plates in the book.)

Part 5, “Power, Space, and Trade,” takes us beyond estates and temples. Sachiko Kawai’s chapter on the *nyoin*, or retired empresses, shows how women navigated the many intrigues at court, all while trying to build up power bases not only within Japan but overseas, too. Rieko Kamei-Dyche then takes us through the life of Saionji Kintsune (1171–1244), a man so wealthy that he “had porters carry two hundred buckets of [*onsen*] water from the spring [at Arima] to his villa, a distance of some twenty-five miles, *on a daily basis*” (p. 319). Kamei-Dyche uses Erving Goffman’s “dramaturgia” theory to demonstrate how the Saionjis and their peers thought spatially to gain advantages on their rivals. In the next chapter, Michelle Damian looks at shipping in the Seto Inland Sea at a time when increased mobility and tighter economic connections changed the estates’ dynamic from earlier centuries.

In part 6, “Power: Challenges and Conflicts,” Philip Garrett uses a border dispute in mid-Kamakura Kii Province to highlight how security issues changed in response to the breakdown in government control and the rise of local lordship. Dan Sherer advances this theme with a fascinating look at the *akutō*. These were “evil bands” (pp. 403, 404) of rowdies who terrorized decent people; or else they were social outcasts or other misfits *called* *akutō* by petitioners seeking to rouse the authorities to remove them. Noda Taizō

then focuses on “warriors and estates in Muromachi-period Harima” (p. 427), gathering in the lingering cultural tendrils of the Heian with a view of military intervention into local disputes.

Part 7 of the volume comprises a single chapter by Ethan Segal, who provides a very helpful survey of estates, explains why they are so difficult to teach, and suggests strategies for overcoming these potential obstacles.

While Goodwin, Piggott, and their authors and translators deserve full credit for producing such a consistently good volume, they readily acknowledge the hard work of generations of earlier scholars working exclusively in Japanese. Debates about the *shōen* have been underway in Japan for decades, and the shadow of two major scholars in particular lies heavy across the present volume: Kuroda Toshio and Amino Yoshihiko. Kuroda’s “gates of power” (*kenmon taisei*) theory (a conceptual shift away from viewing medieval Japan as dominated by warriors, and instead as a power-sharing scheme among warriors, monasteries, and courtly elites), and Amino’s voluminous research inform many of the chapters here. The Goodwin and Piggott volume is thus truly a model of transnational research, and as such deserves the attention of anyone interested in Japan, or in the premodern past in general.