The Geography of Power in Medieval Japan

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ation will have on Japan's global role? This is a very important issue. Since this book does not consider the major political changes of the summer of 1993, I hope he will treat this part of the story in his next work.

In sum, Lincoln's book has many virtues. One is its path-breaking attempt to present a new view of Japan's global role with deep insight. Another is the depth and breadth of the author's understanding of Japan's position in the complicated dimension of the international community. A third is a number of policy recommendations that will draw wide attention. If I had to recommend a single book on Japan's future global role, this would be it.

The Geography of Power in Medieval Japan. By Thomas Keirstead. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1992. ix, 181 pages. $27.95.

Reviewed by
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Let me be clear at the outset about two matters. First, I am a student of early modern and modern Japan, and claim no competencies in medieval Japan studies. This may actually be an advantage because Keirstead is framing a significant topic of medieval history in a general-theoretical language that makes his analysis and its object compelling to any scholar of Japan or of agrarian state societies. It may also be advantageous because Keirstead is harsh on most other medievalists; I have no specialist ax to grind or hurt feelings to nurse. But then because I am no specialist, I cannot fairly assess the empirical basis of his argument, which seems to be an impressive range of primary document collections and a broad reading of the voluminous secondary scholarship on medieval estates.

Second, I hesitated to undertake this review because I had already encountered two earlier reviews by Ronald Toby and Kären Wigen.[1] While perhaps not a matter of ethics, this does compromise the freshness with which one can reach an assessment. Moreover, both were quite favorable reviews by two scholars I hold in high regard, which led me to approach the book with considerable excitement. They seemed to endorse the enthusiastic book cover blurb of Victor Koschmann that this is "an elegantly concise, profusely documented account" that "demonstrates conclusively the ready

1. See the reviews by Kären Wigen in *Journal of Historical Geography,* Vol. 19, No. 3 (1993), pp. 378–79, and by Ronald Toby in *Journal of Asian Studies,* Vol. 53, No. 1 (1994), pp. 209–12.

applicability of Foucaultian concepts and methodology to medieval Japanese social history." In fact, I read the book with increasing exasperation, and the burden of this review is to explain that exasperation. In fairness, though, I encourage the reader to weigh my remarks against the encomiums of other scholars closer to the field.

The Geography of Power in Medieval Japan is actually a much more circumscribed study than the title indicates. It deals with only one site in a larger "geography of power," that of the *shōen* or estate, and ignores what I would expect to be other critical spaces and places in such a geography, including urban settlements, markets, temples, military houses, the *bakufu,* the imperial court, women, maritime and mountain ecosystems, indeed agricultural production itself.[2] Still, the site that is his subject is arguably the central topic if not of medieval Japan then at least of its historiography to date.

Keirstead argues, however, that his approach to this familiar topic is quite novel. In one of the many restatements of his problematic, he writes that:

> This study commences not with "where does the estate system fit in the march of history?" or "what patterns of landholding or administration can be observed on different estates?" but, more basically, with "How did the shōen constitute a social and cultural system?" The central problem, as I see it, is to mark the social, spatial, and other configurations that delimited the realm of the *shōen* and to register the patterns of interaction that provided for the system's reproduction over time. (p. 8)

Behind this is both a broad premise and a more particular orientation. The premise is that words do things. That is, Keirstead situates himself within the general, and fruitful, view that language does not mirror an objective reality, nor is it a transparent vehicle for achieving individual objectives. Language is a structure but it also structures—identities, social relations, knowledge, even consciousness. Language is not a neutral medium of communication but a pervasive construction of power. Within the frame of the speakable are the narrower limits of the normal and the authoritative. We should not be taken in by language's apparent functionality and referentiality, because this only deflects our appreciation of how far it embodies creativity, encodes power, and shapes our experience of the world.

However, this premise of language pragmatics is pluralist; it lies behind a great many theoretical orientations that are themselves quite distinct—structuralisms and poststructuralisms of several varieties, linguistic prag-

2. Keirstead has more recently considered one other site in this geography, the garden, in his "Gardens and Estates: Medievality and Space," *positions,* Vol. 1, No. 2 (1993), pp. 289–320.

matic theory, conversational analysis and ethnomethodology, etc. I shall argue below that Keirstead is not sufficiently clear about his own orientation, but his primary allegiance is clear. It is the discourse-centered poststructuralism of Michel Foucault, one of the most complex and provocative approaches in social theory, which has proven enormously fertile to a great many analysts. Its application to Japanese history is most welcome.

Given these presuppositions, then, Keirstead proceeds to conceptualize the "configurations" of the medieval manorial order as a "social space" (p. 8), a geosocial arrangement of persons; as "structures of legitimation," the administrative documents and procedures that stipulated duties, justified exactions, and underwrote the legitimacy of counterclaims by those subject to the system (ibid.); and as "networks of signification" (p. 9), an ordering of meanings into a discourse whose boundaries demarcated the meaningful. Words constituted a world.

The opening and closing chapters (one and five) consider the emergence (Keirstead might prefer eruption) of an estate system in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and its transformations in the fifteenth century. The three central chapters of the book dissect key elements of the discourse that was the estate system. He discloses what Althusser would call the "interpellation" of person, place, and protest by the *shōen* order: the *hyakushō* cultivator, subject to and of the estates (chapter two); the *hyakushō myō,* the arable estate units of exaction and entitlement (chapter three); and the *hyakushō moshijō,* the grievance petitions and associated actions that formed spectacles of protest mounted with the gestures of conventionality (chapter four). Throughout these often enlightening discussions, the documents of the medieval estate, no doubt familiar to all students of the epoch, are read not as surviving records through which we might glimpse the social processes of estate expansion, surveying practices, boundary quarrels, rent collection, tax disputes, and the like. Rather, to Keirstead, *shōen* rent rolls, land registers, surveying protocols, estate maps, and cultivator oaths and petitions were the system's "conditions of existence" (p. 24). They produced the people and places of the estates and their meaningful actions and power-laden interactions.[3]

Keirstead represents his argument as a radical break with existing scholarship—possibly as sharp a disjuncture as the medieval estate system was with land proprietorship prior to the eleventh century. He finds the intellectual airspace of his fellow Japan medievalists to be thin. He peppers the

3. Given this, I found it odd that there are no maps, no registers, and no complete petitions reproduced in this short volume. Keirstead's documentation is impressively footnoted, and perhaps his fellow specialists will know the full texts and particular maps he discusses. Their absence here, however, presents other readers from gaining any direct encounter with the written traces of this power/knowledge nexus, so crucial to his argument.

book with sharp critiques of all earlier approaches—at least by Japanese scholars. Western research is mentioned only glancingly, usually by a perfunctory footnote on a small point. Whatever the reasons for this, I would hold that the potential significance of his claims demands a more serious engagement with the work of his dissertation supervisor, Jeffrey Mass, as well as the work of others whom he might consider to be closer kindred, such as Michele Marra, William R. LaFleur, and Herman Ooms.[4]

Be that as it may, his attack focuses on the principal Japanese medievalists, from Asakawa Kan'ichi and Nakada Kaoru through Amino Yoshihiko. They are accused of unwarranted universalism—of seeking to apply transcultural categories like antiquity and medievality to the Japanese experience. They are found to be naively systematic in trying to model an "estate system." They are too economistic, too positivist, too narrativist. They share a false teleological commitment to an upward cline of progressive development, and tend toward the organicist fallacy—always looking for emergence at one end and decline at the other. Actually, I learned much from his erudite analyses of individual scholars such as Kuroda Toshio (pp. 49–50), Satō Kazuhiko (p. 79), and others—so much so that I became suspicious of such wholesale tar-and-feathering.

What puzzles me, in part, about this derision of everyone else's fixation with linear narrative, teleological progress, and developmental stages is that Keirstead himself finds at least some of these historiographic formulations indispensable. Over and over, we are reminded of the radicalness of this study's intervention, and yet he too seems to be looking for a system (albeit an estate "order," not estate "institutions"); he too seeks to apply universalist concepts of, for instance, power and knowledge; and there is for him, too, a before, during, and after to the estate "order."

The opening chapter, for example, "In Go-Sanjō's Archive" is precisely about the emergence of the *shōen* system, and the closing chapter five concerns "the point at which the system of estates ceased to enunciate a social ordering" (p. 99). They're marked here as "breaks" (p. 14) and "thresholds" (p. 99), but I'm afraid the distinction is lost on me. About the former, "semantic break" he writes:

> The story of the estate system, therefore, must be that of a distinct break in the context and conceptualization of estate holding. And one begins to tell

4. I have in mind especially Marra's *The Aesthetics of Discontent: Politics and Reclusion in Medieval Japanese Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991); LaFleur's *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); and Ooms's *Tokugawa Ideology: Early Constructs, 1570–1680* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). Ooms is thanked as an "insightful critic" (p. ix), but I wish Keirstead had taken more to heart his notion of "ideology."

> that story by recognizing the break and attending to the new orders that rewrote the usage of the term. (pp. 13–14)

This radical break is said to have occurred "suddenly" (p. 16), but it sounds to me to have come rather slowly:

> In sum, the emergence of the estate system predicated a new series of structural links between central proprietors and the countryside, and this restructuring can be traced to a specific historical moment. That "moment" is the twelfth century (if the limits of that century may be stretched so as to incorporate a movement begun in the last decades of the eleventh century). (p. 15)

The break was a broad conceptual shift in, among other dimensions, the valences of public and private; the system emerged from the differentiation of a unitary realm into distinct public and private domains (pp. 14–16). This is an intriguing formulation, but it seems to rely on the very historiography that Keirstead is otherwise debunking so furiously. Perhaps I am too uncritical a consumer of medieval history, but I thought that this has become a rather familiar viewpoint. Keirstead would no doubt feel I'm missing the significance of the difference—narratives can only ploddingly evolve, while orders can dramatically break. But then, narrativity is like medieval-ness; he does not "pretend to have escaped narrativity" (p. 121). I suppose this means that it is used here with a reflexive rhetorical sophistication that has eluded all previous medievalists, but I confess to some irritation with those who want to break the cake of custom and eat it too.

My growing resistance to the book was exacerbated by its rather repetitive exposition—I do not find it as concise as Koschmann does—and by too much bob-and-weaving—e.g., field registers in one section are texts of elite normalization (p. 61), and in the next section become "particular and local . . . an indispensable local referent" (p. 62). Or: "the *myō* system therefore effects an identification—between the subject, rents, and fields—that had normative as well as utilitarian value; and this, not the supposed efficiency of the system, seems to me the force behind its adoption" (p. 68). But the very next sentences introduce rather different forces: "In part, too, the choice of *myō* was conditioned by received practice. The *myō* of the *shōen* perpetuate a terminology that first appeared in the ninth and tenth centuries" (ibid.). Complementary, perhaps, but one would like to know more precisely the relationship between discursive effect and persistence of custom. This is not a small-minded point; it touches on a fundamental issue never coherently formulated in the book—the connection between diachronic and synchronic analysis—which I will return to below.

While I am being cranky about style, though, let me also observe that a number of the arguments do not seem as profound or breathtaking as their

formulations make them appear. Are we to be shocked that surveying is a political act that "demonstrates a need to stabilize" (p. 70)? Is it really surprising that tax rolls are found to be abstract? Much of this unnecessary medievalist originality is found especially in the fourth chapter on "protest as theater." Keirstead draws himself up against two straw-figures here. First, he takes issue with a notion that peasant rebellion is spontaneous and "quasi-mystical,"[5] but this has hardly been a compelling argument in comparative agrarian studies for several decades. Even passing reference to Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol, William Sewell, James Scott, Michael Adas, Ram Guha, William Roseberry, Eric Wolf, or a host of others would allow Keirstead to fit his work *into* a sophisticated scholarly context rather than exhuming long-dead intellectual carcasses. I suppose that standing out is more the motivation here than fitting in. But it's a shame that they are viewed as diametric choices.

A second claim of this chapter is that the peasants can never be outside of the system but rather remain inside, complaining and compliant at the same time. Of course that is so, but if this is new to medieval Japan studies, then they are further into the Dark Ages than I suspected. One would have to look no further than E. P. Thompson's various essays on eighteenth-century England or Mervyn James on sixteenth-century popular rebellion to find eloquent demonstrations of precisely what Keirstead claims in the passage from page 86 quoted above—namely that cultivator grievances are largely framed in and with the language of the very authority they contest.[6] The tough questions are those that follow upon this premise: how are we to understand the degrees of accommodation and contestation across a "geography of power"? How, when, and why are some able to leverage the language of power and to enact a "theater of protest" to seismic effect? About these, the book is not illuminating.

Indeed, the chapter's overarching metaphor of a "theater of protest" is curiously undeveloped (and universalist). Much is made but little is done with this figure of speech. Where's the theater? The section on the oaths sworn by indignant estate inhabitants is titled "the rituals of rebellion"

5. For example, "the shōen rebellion derived its power and its threat not from any unique capacity for unified action on the part of the peasantry, but rather from its appropriation of the same forms that underlay the language of authority. This conception contrasts with much of current scholarship in that it locates the force driving agrarian revolt not in some vaguely defined, quasi-mystical potency derived from the solidarity of the primitive peasant community, but instead in the sophisticated manner in which shōen inhabitants manipulated the symbols that underwrote the identity of *all* groups in medieval Japan" (p. 86).

6. Thompson is footnoted briefly on a small point about ritual and violence, but the larger shape of his work is ignored. His eighteenth-century essays are now collected in revised versions as *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York: New Press, 1991). Mervyn James's essays were collected in his *Society, Politics and Culture: Essays in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

(p. 83), but rituals are not necessarily the same as theater; and the rounds of petitions by Tara Estate *hyakushō* in 1304–6 (pp. 88–89) sound more like civil court wranglings than stage drama. But if this is theater, then of what kind? Are we to understand the Tara Estate grievances as the Elizabethan theater of Jean-Christophe Agnew and Stephen Mullaney; or the transgressive theatricality of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White; or Erving Goffman's theatricality of everyday life; or Michael Taussig's theater of violence?[7]

Keirstead is not without theoretical inspiration. In fact, a multiplicity of positions is invoked, but none is very rigorously applied. For example, Keirstead tries on a number of constructs to represent the estate: at various points, it is a social system (citing Anthony Giddens), a place/space (Michel de Certeau), a cultural system (Clifford Geertz), a cultural scheme (Marshall Sahlins), a social practice (Pierre Bourdieu), a cultural construct of persisting practices (Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer), and a discursive formation (Michel Foucault). We are caught up in a citation whirlwind of currently trendy theorists. The problem is that while we may wish to conceive of the *shōen* as any of these, it cannot be all of them.

Geertz, for example, is used to supplement Giddens to create what Keirstead calls "social or cultural systems" on page 8, or, in the footnote to that sentence, "social and cultural systems" (p. 122, footnote 13). But this assertion that Giddens's "social" does not "differ substantially" (ibid.) from Geertz's "cultural" is simply wrong. Certainly, too, Geertz's Parsonian-symbolic notion of culture is anathema to Sahlins's structuralist conceptualization, while Bourdieu's concept of practice is directed to an entirely different epistemological level. And none can be equated with a Foucaultian discursive formation.

It is quite possible that there is something that each of these theorists can contribute to Keirstead's project, but hit-and-run references cannot substitute for a sustained encounter with their ideas. Bourdieu's notion of practice can hardly be tossed in without reckoning with his larger framework of field, capital, and habitus. A brief quotation from Marshall Sahlins in Keirstead's final chapter (p. 113) misses the opportunity to apply seriously Sahlins's structuralist rendering of historical anthropology. Even Foucault's discursive formation (mentioned on p. 96) gains significance not only from his concept of power (which Keirstead *does* use in a rigorous and effective

7. Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Stephen Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988); Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986); Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1959); Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987).

way), but also from his notion of episteme, a higher order of analysis that Keirstead does not broach.[8] In short, Keirstead assembles a suggestive set of heady possibilities, but this does not create a consistent theoretical orientation.

Nonetheless, judging from the preponderance of references, one might argue that all of these invocations are but leavening of the study's primary inspiration, Michel Foucault. Indeed, "geography" of power seems more curious in light of his commitment to Foucault. Archeology of power might be more appropriate (e.g., pp. 14, 18). This is precisely what Keirstead is after in treating *hyakushō, myō,* and *hyakushō moshijō* as forming, in Foucault's famous phrasing, "the objects of which they speak":

> What, in short, we wish to do is to dispense with "things." . . . To substitute for the enigmatic treasure of "things" anterior to discourse, the regular formation of objects that emerge only in discourse. To define these *objects* without reference to the *ground,* the *foundation of things,* but by relating them to the body of rules that enable them to form as objects of a discourse and thus constitute the conditions of their historical appearance.[9]

I have gone on too long and too petulantly here to rehearse the various epistemological dangers that have been noted for the perilous "descent into discourse."[10] Keirstead himself anticipates several toward the end of his study (pp. 110–12), although at that point I think it does little to deflect the force of these criticisms by asserting simply that discursive systems are "fundamentally unstable" (p. 114). No doubt they are, but nowhere does he specify the relations between the polysemy of words, the instability of discourse, and the struggles between discourse and practice.

My own view is that he cannot specify such relations because he has an apparent antipathy to any approach that takes material process seriously, that takes social life dialectically, and that views cultural meanings ideologically. This is clear despite his proposal, "in particular, to concentrate on the ways in which the daily experience of estate inhabitants shaped and was

8. It is curious in this regard that he does not consider LaFleur's *The Karma of Words,* which does, rather loosely, invoke this notion of "the ground of thought" on which, in a particular epoch, some propositions will be rendered as knowledge and others not.

9. Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Language and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), pp. 47–48 (emphasis in the original). The phrase, "the objects of which they speak" appears on page 49.

10. The phrase is Bryan Palmer's; see his *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990). See also, among many others, Trevor Purvis and Alan Hunt, "Discourse, Ideology, Discourse, Ideology, Discourse, Ideology . . . ," *British Journal of Sociology,* Vol. 44, No. 3 (Sept. 1993), pp. 473–99.

shaped by the structures of the system" (p. 14). "Was shaped," yes, but "shaped," no. There is virtually nothing of that constituting daily experience in the book.

Take, for example, the Foucaultian distinction he draws between institutions and orders. "Instead of attempting to identify the shōen system with a particular configuration of institutions (types of estates, modes of proprietorship, patterns of landholding), we must be concerned with the orders within which those institutions, in all their diversity, were constituted and structured" (p. 9). The footnote to this sentence illustrates this distinction with reference to the contemporary U.S. justice system.

> This system is composed of a number of layers of courts, various levels of police or prisons, etc. These I regard as the *institutions*—i.e., the positive manifestations of the system of justice. But the system also embodies certain assumptions about crime and criminal behavior, about punishment, about the role of law, etc. These are the *orders* within which, and according to which, the positive institutions/instruments of the justice system are conceived and arrayed. (footnote 15, p. 123).

This is a structuralist deadend. To say that institutions manifest what orders constitute—that institutions reflect what orders generate—simply replaces one reductive logic with another.

Again, Keirstead appears to recognize this: in the final chapter, he insists that "discursive formations are not totalizing abstractions or perfect monoliths . . . even as they organize and structure practice, discourses are produced and shaped by that practice" (p. 111). But this is too little, too late. Keirstead persuasively—and innovatively—demonstrates the lineaments of power and knowledge in the discourse of the medieval estate system. But in choosing to ignore ideology, hegemony, and material process as potentially useful analytic concepts, he has no way to formulate the dialectic of discourse and practice that he intimates is required to appreciate that system "as a field of struggle" (p. 114). In his zeal to build his own order on top of the ashes of others, Keirstead offers a false choice between naive, positivist "economism" and a (post-)enlightened discourse analysis.

In short, there is in this book the kernel of an insightful and imaginative application by a talented, informed scholar of a powerful perspective on the medieval estate. It is all the more dismaying, then, that this contribution is nearly buried by a slurry of gratuitous critique, hyperbolic claims, and theoretical inconsistency. Do not misunderstand me; I am not one of his shrill positivists complaining that it is misguided to formulate the medieval estate as a discursive formation. Keirstead convinces me that it could be a significant shift of focus—a Derridean *supplement.* But this remains a garbled assertion, not a convincing accomplishment.