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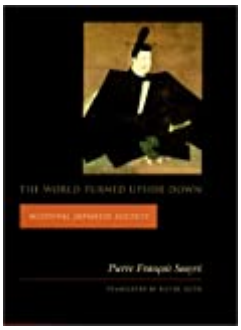

**Pierre Francois Souyri.** *The World Turned Upside Down: Medieval Japanese Society.* Translated by Kathe Roth. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001. x + 280 pp. $37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-11842-2.

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## The Riches of Medieval Japanese Society

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Finding a single-volume work in English on the history of modern Japan has never been easier than now. Recent books by Marius Jansen and James McClain fill out a field that already included well-regarded volumes by Peter Duus and Kenneth Pyle, among others. These books are as suitable for the classroom as for the broader public. On the other hand, try finding a good textbook on Japan from ancient times to 1600, or more telling still, a scholar interested in attempting to write such a book. It seems that the voluminous scholarship now available on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Japan has given scholars confidence to write the period's history, but the reverse has been the case for premodern Japan: abundant scholarship on those centuries appears to have convinced scholars that their knowledge of this long and complex period is meager. Thus the publication in English of Pierre Francois Souyri's *The World Turned Upside Down: Medieval Japanese Society*, is noteworthy and very welcome–never mind the fact that Souyri only covers the medieval world, from 1180 to 1600.

In just over two hundred pages, Souyri provides a convincing and coherent view of the Japan of these centuries, and does it far better than has been done before in English. Though of course there is much left out of his history, the remarkable point is how much is included. And it is done in a readable and engaging manner. Whether the praise for this should be Souyri's alone or should be shared with the book's translator (the book was published in French in 1998), in either case, it is a fine achievement. Souyri's ability to discuss complex topics without dividing his material into rigid categories brings a subtlety and a sophistication to his arguments that are also welcome. No doubt one reason that Souyri succeeds in describing this period is that the period (or at least a significant part of it) is his area of emphasis. He writes with a surety and knowledge that others who have covered medieval Japan in their surveys of Japanese history have lacked. Souyri is familiar with many primary sources and with much of the scholarship produced by Japanese scholars, and draws upon these effectively.

As much as I liked this book, I often found myself disagreeing with Souyri's interpretations or emphases. In fact, I believe that his broad pronouncements on the pe-

riod are mistaken. But this is a survey volume and its focus is not so narrow as a single thesis. One can disagree with Souyri on certain points yet still find much to admire and appreciate in this volume. For that matter, I would argue that Souyri's "big arguments" fail to mesh with his evidence–which allows the discerning reader to glean from the evidence his own view of medieval Japan.

The title of this book, *The World Turned Upside Down*, is a good place to start with a critique of Souyri's "big arguments." It is an idea that he develops in the first chapter, going so far as to suggest that the fifteenth-century term *gekokujo* ("the lower commanding [or overthrowing] the upper") is a useful concept for describing political and social developments that began in the late twelfth century. In other words, the medieval era as a whole was an age of gekokujo. In the same chapter, Souyri notes categorically that "in the late twelfth century, people called the transitional period in which they were living the 'age of the warriors' " (p. 2). These are big assertions. Was in fact Japan's world "turned upside down" during these four centuries? And did Japanese living in 1185 call this the "age of the warriors"? The second assertion is irritating not because it is wrong–though I suspect it is–but because it is misguided. Who were the "people" that Souyri is talking about? Were they commoners, aware now that power at the top was not concentrated so fully in the hands of the old aristocracy? Of course not. In fact, the quote "age of the warriors" comes from *Gukansho*, the history written in the early thirteenth century by the priest Gien. Perhaps Gien would have found others among the elite to agree with him that an age of warriors had begun; perhaps not. In any case, the phrase "age of the warriors" was hardly common at the time.

The contention that medieval Japan was a "world turned upside down" raises bigger issues, and it presents a view that is at odds with much recent scholarship, certainly with work produced in English. For example, Souyri takes the position that feudal Japan (or medieval Japan–synonymous terms for many Japanese historians) began with the rise of Minamoto Yoritomo in the late twelfth century. This framework has been questioned for several decades now by scholars who are uncomfortable with the designation of the era as feudal. Some scholars might contend that this viewpoint is limited largely to western, particularly American, scholarship, but the Japanese academy has increasingly examined and interpreted topics in "non-feudal" ways. In the West, this process of reinterpretation peaked five years ago with the publication of *The Origins of Japan's Medieval World*, in which Jeffrey Mass and his associates contend that the beginnings of medieval Japan are found in the fourteenth, not the twelfth, century. Although not all contributors to the volume wholeheartedly endorse this position, they appear to agree that the old interpretation is flawed.

This effort to change the boundaries of the ancient and medieval worlds was the logical outcome of research by scholars who have come to believe that the Heian and Kamakura periods were marked more by continuities than disjunction. They believe that although warriors attained a share of power previously monopolized by courtiers and clerics, the size of that share has long been exaggerated by historians. Furthermore, they maintain that, when considered in terms of social class, those in power in the Kamakura period (and Muromachi era as well) were still individuals of privileged birth, linked to the hereditary elite by pedigree.

In stressing the role of the warriors during the medieval era, Souyri de-emphasizes the place of the old elite–the court and the priesthood. Though accepted by many Japanese historians, this interpretation is far from universal, and its dominance in the academy continues to weaken. The most compelling argument against it is the theory of *kenmon taisei* or "gates of power system." Put forth by Kuroda Toshio in several articles and books in the 1960s and 70s, the kenmon theory maintains that the medieval power system was built upon the institutions of the court, the priesthood, and the military. The members of these institutions were the elite, who dominated (and shared) power, authority, and wealth. Although the kenmon theory has only recently received the attention in English it deserves, scholars such as Jeffrey Mass, Cameron Hurst, and Karl Friday have produced studies dating back a decade and more which lend weight to the idea.[1]

In sum, Souyri's assertions about a world turned upside down are highly debatable, as is his contention that the medieval era was an age of warriors. More than a few scholars see greater continuity and more gradual change between the ancient and medieval eras, in which both the imperial court and Buddhism played a much larger role in Japan's world. This is not to suggest that Souyri fully ignores these two institutions. In fact, here we see some of the inconsistency between Souyri's big arguments and his evidence. While appearing to bury the now defunct court (as of 1185) in the book's first chapter, Souyri has only placed it in a deep sleep, from which he revives it periodically to discuss its political influence and economic pull.

Souyri's neglect of traditional Buddhism is more se-

rious. Though he provides good, succinct descriptions of important new Buddhist thinkers and sects, he offers little about the social and political influence of Buddhism (except for the late medieval Ikko sect). I suspect that most undergraduate and non-specialist readers of the book will fail to catch the brief references to Buddhist temples as holders of estates (*shoen*). The same criticism can be applied to Souyri's discussion of the shoen system itself, an institution that is insufficiently explained. Here the problem is not in misinterpretation, since Souyri clearly recognizes the shoen's importance, but in a failure to emphasize it adequately. A glance at the index reveals a half page of references, suggesting thorough coverage, but Souyri never provides an extended discussion of the shoen (he comes closest on pp. 37-40, though the focus there is on the rising power of the warriors within the estate system). One familiar with the workings of shoen may find Souyri's approach acceptable, but others will probably fail to grasp many key features of the institution.

My final criticism, before turning to the book's many strengths, is that the coverage of the Kamakura era fails to equal that given to later eras. The first section of the book draws heavily on literary sources and is frequently couched in narrative rather than analytical terms. Where Souyri could have drawn, for example, on Jeffrey Mass's work on land and inheritance practices or William Wayne Farris's research on the evolution of the warriors, and thereby strengthened his arguments, he fails to do so.[2] This is unfortunate, since Souyri is highly capable at analyzing and describing important institutions and developments, as seen in the chapters that follow.

The fact is that much of Souyri's depiction of the Kamakura age is good, but he excels in the sections on the Muromachi and Sengoku eras. He is especially strong in his portrayals of social conditions, village life, economic developments, and marginal peoples. Even in his discussions of the Kamakura era, the best sections center on those issues and come under subheadings such as "Trade in the Countryside," "Emancipation of the Serfs," "The 'People of the Sea'," "Dancers and Courtesans," and "The Pariah." And these are just a few of the numerous topics he discusses well. Regional issues, for example, receive extensive treatment, as Souyri finds space to discuss ties between Kamakura and Kyoto, the Kinai as an economic center, and the economic roles of places such as Okinawa, Lake Biwa, and Hyogo. In this regard, Souyri pursues topics that belie a reliance on traditional interpretations. Instead he owes much to the work of scholars like Amino Yoshihiko and Hayashiya Tatsusaburo.

I found Souyri to be at his best when sorting out and explicating the complex social and political developments that occurred at the local and regional levels during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In these sections, Souyri skillfully delineates the roles of *shugo* (provincial military governors), *shugodai* (deputy governors), *myoshu* (wealthy peasants), *jizamurai* (low-level samurai), and *so* (village organizations) in the context of political struggle, war, and economic growth and competition. For example, here is a selection from a paragraph on jizamurai of the sengoku era. The quote is excessively lengthy but well worth examining.

"In the fifteenth century, the jizamurai were still close enough to the peasants to feel loyalty to their own kind, and they led rural uprisings for abolishing debt and promoting local autonomy. By the mid-sixteenth century, however, they were sufficiently detached from the peasantry that their material interests had also diverged; they then joined the vassal organizations that the warlords had started to build in their fiefs and help[ed] expand the new feudal authority. Relations between jizamurai and peasants were complex. The sense of belonging to the community was strong and cohesive, especially because peasants and low-ranking warriors were often related by blood. Whenever there was a poor harvest, the samurai lent food, money, and seeds to peasants in difficulty, who were then beholden to them. Sometimes the samurai, like the peasants, were victims of exploitation by urban usurers, in which case, they became spokesmen for the entire community with the landlord or bakufu" (p. 186).

This is a book that English-speaking historians of Japan should read. Historians of modern Japan should read it to remind themselves that much came before their era of interest and that our views of those times continue to change. For those who study the centuries prior to Tokugawa, this is a book to learn from and to debate. As a textbook covering part of Japan's premodern era, it would be a vast improvement over anything now available, and I urge Columbia University Press to issue it soon in paperback.

Notes

[1]. On the kenmon system see Mikael S. Adolphson, *The Gates of Power: Monks, Courtiers, and Warriors in Premodern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000). For reassessments of "feudal powers and institutions" in the Heian and Kamakura eras, see Karl F. Fri-

day, *Hired Swords: The Rise of Private Warrior Power in Early Japan* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992); G. Cameron Hurst III, *Insei: Abdicated Sovereigns in the Politics of Late Heian Japan, 1086-1185* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976); and any of the numerous works of Jeffrey Mass published after 1980–see, for example, his chapter "The Kamakura Bakufu" in *The Cambridge History of Japan*, volume 3: *Medieval Japan*, pp. 46-88 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[2]. Jeffrey Mass, *Lordship and Inheritance in Early Medieval Japan: A Study of the Kamakura Soryo System* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1989); William Wayne Farris, *Heavenly Warriors: The Evolution of Japan's Military, 500-1300*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).



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