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## BOOK REVIEW

### **Review of *Rethinking Japan's Modernity* by M. William Steele. Cambridge, Mass and London, 2025. 352 pages**

In historical studies, it is essential to avoid reducing historical processes to a linear narrative. However, focusing only on extremely micro-level events to avoid it can lead to losing sight of the entire picture. M. William Steele's *Rethinking Japan's Modernity*, drawing on various historical materials, highlights the multiple voices and emotions of people from the last days of the Edo period (*bakumatsu*) onward at a micro level. By presenting Japan's "modernity" not as a linear process, but as an arena of debates, conflicts, and transnational interactions, it offers a way to avoid the above dilemma. Viewed through the lens of "Enlightenment" symbolized by Fukuzawa Yukichi's call to "leave Asia and join the West", modern Japanese history often appears as a linear catch-up narrative of events after the impactful arrival of the Black Ship. Reduced to its most basic elements, the historical plot runs as follows: the shocking arrival of the Black Ship that opened the Tokugawa shogunate to the Western great powers, the Meiji Restoration after the civil war, victories in two wars with Qing and Russia, and the defeat in World War II after Japan's imperialistic expansion.

Steele's project is to multiply historical actors and sources and place the process of Japanese modernization in an international context separate from the master narrative presented above. However, he does not swing his pen like an axe, trying to offer a sweeping historical narrative. Instead, what stands out in his work is his method of recovering muffled voices and surfacing the emotions of ordinary people. In doing so, he does not aim to deny the nationalist, single-track narrative altogether; instead, he seeks to reposition it as one voice among many within the broader, contested space of Japanese experiences in modernity.



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This book consists of thirteen chapters. Although each chapter takes up a distinct topic, they all encourage readers to weave multiple voices and angles together in organic ways and interpret what the Japanese modernization was in the constellation of multiple subjects and voices. Steele's approach enables his readers to move beyond a single narrative perspective on history and to sense the anxieties, fears, and hopes of the people in the past amid turmoil and social transformation. It also presents a rhythm of history in which Japan's modernization did not proceed in a straight line, but rather as a mixture of various emotions and voices.

The author, needless to say, is a leading specialist in late-Edo and Meiji Japanese history, and has previously written works such as *Alternative Narratives in Modern Japanese History* (Steele 2003). To extend that title, *Rethinking Japan's Modernity* does more than illuminate the "light" of Japan's Enlightenment modernity. It also casts an attentive gaze on the "shadows": Japanese people who were tossed about by modernity's promises, and the things lost, forgotten, or left behind in the wake of modernization and westernization.

Chapter 1 reframes the familiar story of Japan's "opening", ushered in by Commodore Perry's Black Ships, by presenting it through the *vistas* that Californians cast across the Pacific. In 1848, Americans, propelled westward by the so-called frontier spirit, reached California. How, then, did they envision Japan lying beyond the Pacific? Drawing mainly on newspaper articles of the time, Steele reveals a strong public enthusiasm for expanding free trade and a commitment to a civilizing mission. In this way, he opens the late-nineteenth-century American history onto the Pacific, showing how Japan's "opening" came into focus within that westward-looking vision.

Chapter 2 turns to a woodblock print titled *Kaei Nenkan-yori Kome Sōba Nedan-narabi-ni Nendaiki Kakinuki Daishimpan*, 'A new publication of rice market prices and chronicle of selected events beginning with the Kaei era' (嘉永年間より米相場直段并年代記書棧大新版), to illuminate how ordinary people lived and how they felt from the arrival of the Black Ships through the turmoil of the late Tokugawa period and into the Meiji Restoration. From this woodblock print, published in 1868, Steele vividly reformulates both the everyday life of Edo's townspeople and the crushing hardships they faced. As the political order that had persisted for over 250 years began to falter, a sharp inflation, illustrated by skyrocketing rice prices, swept through society, pushing many further into poverty. On top of that came earthquakes, tsunamis, storms, and epidemics. As the author aptly notes, for those living on the eve of Meiji Japan, "There is no hope for the future" (p. 55). In short, it was a dark time. Read alongside Chapter 1,

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Chapter 2 reveals a striking contrast: while California's "vistas" imagined a bright, expansive future for Japan, the people within Japan itself were descending into what Steele calls an "apocalypse", a plunge into the deepening shadows of the *bakumatsu* years.

Chapter 3 shifts the spotlight from the well-known westernizer Fukuzawa Yukichi to the largely overlooked Fukuzawa of the late Tokugawa years, revealing his views on politics and the state before the Meiji Restoration. Steele, drawing on his English translation of a petition that Fukuzawa submitted to the Tokugawa house in 1866, demonstrates that Fukuzawa actually supported a shogunate-centered regime for a newly unified country. The details are best left to the book itself, but in essence, Fukuzawa envisioned a post-opening Japan in which the Tokugawa would discard the old feudal structure and assume the position of a constitutional monarchy.

Chapter 4 reconsiders the popular notion of the Meiji Restoration as a bloodless revolution by examining satirical cartoons that circulated widely in 1868. Many of these prints portray children in Edo at play or scenes featuring commoners, while simultaneously hinting at political actors such as the Satsuma and Chōshū domains, the Aizu, and the Sendai. By examining this visual archive, Steele illustrates how these cartoons, which were shared among ordinary people, reflect the anxieties that influenced daily life from the final years of the Tokugawa period. Some of the prints rely on wordplay unique to Japanese, and one of the joys of this chapter is Steele's thoughtful translations. For instance, the rendering of the cartoon *Bammin Odoroki* (万民おどろ木), which depicts people scrambling under a "money tree", as "The people *wood* be shocked".

Chapter 5 takes up the figure of Sada Kaiseki, a little-known thinker who championed *expelling the barbarians* before the Meiji Restoration and later criticized the flood of new Western goods entering Japan. At first glance, Sada may seem like a stubborn traditionalist resisting the Enlightenment spirit embodied by Fukuzawa Yukichi. And yes, there is undoubtedly some truth to that impression. But Steele's close reading of Sada's writings reveals something more nuanced. Sada was not merely rejecting the West; he was urging Japan to think seriously about and actively experiment with its own path to "civilization" instead of relying entirely on Western models. He traveled the country giving public talks, created visual materials showing what kinds of foreign goods were pouring in, and even published a pamphlet titled *Baka-no Banzuke* (馬鹿の番付) 'A ranking of fools', a sharp satire skewering those who unquestioningly embraced Western lifestyles.

Chapter 6 turns to another relatively obscure figure, the parody writer Mantei Ōga. Like Sada, Ōga resisted the Meiji modernity – but he did so

with a dose of humor. This chapter focuses on Ōga's 1895 *Katsuron Gakumon Suzume* (活論学問雀) 'Sparrows at the gates of learning: A spirited debate', a parody of Fukuzawa Yukichi's 1872 *Gakumon-no Susume* (学問のすすめ) 'Encouragement of learning', the quintessential manifesto of the Enlightenment-era Meiji. Steele includes an English translation of *Sparrows*. Ōga's sharp critiques and biting satire directed at Fukuzawa reveal a contrasting perspective on Enlightenment modernity. This viewpoint blends humor with a sense of unease, presenting playful, skeptical, and sometimes anxious counterpoints to the era's sincere optimism.

Chapter 7 draws the readers' attention to Katsu Kaishū. Katsu served as a military commander under the Tokugawa regime in the final years of the shogunate and famously negotiated the peaceful handover of Edo Castle to the new Meiji government. After the Restoration, he compiled a wide array of documents – some dealing with the shogunate's finances and military affairs, others concerning its foreign relations. Alongside these public and administrative writings, he also authored *Bakufu Shimatsu* (幕府始末) 'The last days of the Shogunate', a 1895 memoir based on his own experience. In that memoir, Katsu underscores the stability of public institutions and social order during the Tokugawa era, while emphasizing that the Meiji government could only function because it was built upon that foundation. In other words, Meiji was not a complete break from Edo, but a continuation made possible by it. From this perspective, Steele offers a counterview to the traditional narrative of rupture which gave rise to the Enlightenment-era Meiji; what he describes is a view that draws attention to historical continuity and to those who were sacrificed or sidelined in the Restoration – in short, to the losers as well as the winners.

Chapter 8 offers an overview of Fukuzawa's final published work, i.e., the 1891 essay *Yasegaman-no Setsu* (痩せ我慢の説), 'On fighting to the bitter end', together with an English translation. In this short piece, Fukuzawa casts a critical eye on figures such as Katsu Kaishū and Enomoto Takeaki, who led the Hakodate War. Although both had belonged to the defeated side, they nonetheless went on to occupy important posts in the new Meiji government. According to Fukuzawa, although these men enabled the formation of the Meiji state through compromise, they lacked *yasegaman*, the stubborn resolve to keep resisting the Satsuma-Chōshū forces to the very end. Here, Fukuzawa's own political philosophy comes sharply into view: in contrast to Katsu's emphasis on conciliation and accommodation, Fukuzawa stressed the importance of establishing a strong state by force, if necessary.

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Chapter 9 revisits the common assumption that the *mingei* (民藝) or folk craft movement, championed by Yanagi Sōetsu, was a uniquely Japanese development that began in the 1920s. Steele shows that the enthusiasm for finding beauty in everyday objects and collecting them was hardly confined to Japan; it was an international response to the industrialization, urbanization, and mechanization that swept across the world from the mid-nineteenth century onward. In fact, as early as the beginning of the Meiji era, the archaeologist Edward Sylvester Morse was already an avid collector of local crafts. Yanagi's own interest in the folk craft was directly shaped by his exchanges with the British potter Bernard Leach. Many Japanese and Western collectors alike were turning their eyes toward folk objects. It was within this broader surge of interest that Yanagi's folk craft movement could take shape. At its core was a way of seeing: a gaze that found beauty in everyday life. However, more deeply, it reflected a growing fascination with the creativity of ordinary people.

Chapter 10 examines how the Japanese public reacted to the 1920 Anglo-Japanese Alliance. With this treaty, Japan was recognized on the international stage as a nation standing alongside the Western great powers. The public response was overwhelmingly celebratory, one might even say euphoric. People welcomed the alliance as a promise of peace and prosperity. From this, Steele concludes that nationalism does not necessarily lead to "xenophobic or imperialistic" attitudes; it can just as well nurture "peace and cosmopolitanism". This resonates to some extent with the conciliatory, unity-oriented vision that Katsu had emphasized. However, given the trajectory Japan would follow in the years ahead, one may be tempted to consider how fragile, perhaps even illusory, this form of nationalism ultimately was.

Chapter 11 concerns the massive famine that struck the Tōhoku region between 1905 and 1906, and how domestic and international organizations mobilized humanitarian relief. As Steele notes, this relief effort was "the first major example of joint domestic and international disaster relief operations" (p. 239). The *Christian Herald*, based in New York, reported on the devastation in Tōhoku and raised donations; the American National Red Cross also contributed funds through the Japanese Red Cross. Newspapers within Japan organized their own fundraising campaigns and joined the humanitarian effort. In sharp contrast, the Japanese government responded sluggishly to the crisis and even urged the suffering population to rely on "self-help", revealing a striking lack of effective policy. Situating modern Japanese history within the broader expansion of international humanitarian

aid is illuminating, mainly because this perspective is often overshadowed by Japan's contemporaneous victory in the Russo-Japanese War.

Chapter 12 focuses on the Great Kantō Earthquake, which occurred on September 1, 1923, in order to reinterpret the meaning of the catastrophe through the visual images captured on postcards, a medium that had become increasingly widespread in Japan in the early twentieth century. Postcards circulated as an intuitive, almost instantaneous way of conveying events. However, they did far more than simply record ruined buildings and destroyed cityscapes. These images showed the collapse or disappearance of landmarks associated with modern urban life, symbolized by buildings, entertainment districts, etc. Postcards became a medium through which people confronted deeper questions: Where do we come from, and where are we headed? They prompted a kind of anxious self-reflection about Japan's modern trajectory. While postcards eventually lost prominence with the emergence of newspapers, periodicals, and radio, Steele illustrates how unconventional sources can provide new perspectives for reinterpreting history.

Chapter 13 highlights Kume Kunitake's ambivalent perspective on modernity. Kume, who traveled with the Iwakura Mission and later helped lay the foundations of modern Japanese historiography in the early twentieth century, spent his life continually questioning Japan's future under the growing influence of Western modernity. Having witnessed the mass destruction of the First World War, Kume sometimes leaned toward overvaluing the cultural maturity and social stability achieved during the Edo period. Yet at the same time, his historical outlook was never confined to a narrowly defined national history. On the contrary, it remained open to international interactions and global entanglements. In this sense, Kume's historical vision captured Japan's past, present, and future into a broader perspective through a multifaceted gaze, while also approaching the process of modernization itself as something inherently ambivalent.

Finally, the Epilogue turns to *Meiji Taishō Shōwa daiemaki* (明治大正昭和 大絵巻), 'The great picture scroll of the Meiji, Taishō, and Shōwa eras', published in the popular magazine *King* on January 1, 1931. Using this picture scroll as its central source, the chapter examines how it visualizes Japan's trajectory from 1868 to 1930. The history it portrays is anything but smooth or linear. What stands out, however, is an episode from February 9, 1930, when Wakatsuki Reijirō, having attended the London Naval Conference, delivered a radio address encouraging Japan to commit to international peace, and many Japanese welcomed his words. What can be

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seen from this are the emotional currents and everyday efforts of people who longed for peace amid a turbulent, anxiety-ridden modern age.

Although the themes of the individual chapters differ significantly, together they paint a complex picture of “Enlightenment modernity”, filled with ambivalence, light and shadow, hope and anxiety, progress and tradition. Steele’s aim is not simply to read less-noticed sources, but to trace the double-edged rhythms of Japanese modernity through a diverse constellation of media: woodblock prints, postcards, magazines, and more. This constellation forms a complex past that includes both triumph and loss. Since it is composed of many fragments, it is highly challenging to grasp the entire picture from any single vantage point.

Steele’s method might be described as what Peter Burke, drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin, called “polyphonic history” within the field of cultural history (Burke 2010: 479). It is “dialogue rather than monologue”, “multiple stories rather than a single Grand Narrative” – in short, a “multiplication of voices”. Of course, even under the single label of polyphonic history, the range of possible emphases is wide. One example is the “vision of the vanquished” (Wachtel 1977), a crucial perspective within polyphonic approaches. Wachtel carved out the calamity brought by the Spanish Empire to indigenous peoples of the Aztecs and the Incas in the sixteenth century using literary and poetic expressions and chronicles left by local people. By doing so, Wachtel’s rich historiography succeeded in relativizing the existing historical framework centered on the Spanish side of the historical view that established the master narrative of European expansion, the dichotomy of the Old and the New Worlds, and revealed how traumatic the experience was for indigenous people.

Although one cannot make the Japanese experience of modernization equivalent to the above experiences of the indigenous peoples of the Aztecs and the Incas as the “vision of the vanquished”, one can find a polyphonic history of Japan as the “defeated” in John W. Dower’s *Embracing Defeat* (1999) that reformulates postwar adaptation of people to democracy through interactions with the American occupation forces. Steele’s book clearly resonates with this viewpoint. In this book, the vision of the defeated emerges through diverse ideas, satirical voices, and visual materials that push back against the civilization discourse championed by Fukuzawa Yukichi. These people and records are not “the vanquished” in any direct or literal sense. However, they testify to the exhaustion, anxieties, and alternative visions of Japan’s path that emerged amid the pressures of Westernization.

Having characterized and evaluated Steele's work in this way, one should not overlook a hidden pattern of transformation in Japanese historical perspectives, even though this book does not highlight it. On the one hand, Fujizawa, Katsu, Sōda, Ōga, and Kume, as stakeholders across both eras, illustrate how people's perceptions of modernization are linked to the historical realities of the Edo and Meiji periods, despite the apparent rupture between them. On the other hand, when Steele discusses Yanagi, the Great Kantō Earthquake, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, and the chronicle in the Epilogue, the significance of the Edo era as a reference for the past fades from his narrative. Instead, he focuses more on the themes of peace and internationalism that he hopes to achieve in the future.

Admittedly, people witnessing the damage caused by the Earthquake share a sense of unease about their identity in modern life. However, the unease is no longer anchored to the historical referential point of Edo and Meiji. Thus, it can be seen that the historical realities of Edo and Meiji gradually decreased around the 1920s, when urbanites enjoyed modern life. The unease in modern life, in turn, is expressed more vaguely, as shown by the novelist Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's farewell note: "a vague uneasiness" (*bon'yari-shita fuan*, ボンヤリした不安). Taking this transformation in a historical sense into account, the "multiplication of voices" regarding the sense of historical reality at that time is the task Steele poses for the readers.

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