

Book Review

- Mark Ravina, *To Stand with the Nations of the World: Japan's Meiji Restoration in World History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. xiv + 312. \$24.95 (paper)

Japan's nineteenth century was notably transformative, so it is useful to have a new synthesis in the light of current theory and practice: Ravina's book fills that niche well, and the release of a paperback edition in 2020 makes it more accessible as a teaching text. The title invocation of World History gives a hint as to one of the important audiences for this update: teachers of World History, certainly, but especially the authors of World History textbooks with simplistic, outdated renditions of that critical moment. *To Stand with the Nations of the World* is not a narrative synthesis, but analysis of Japan's modern history in the full light of contemporary world history. One goal is to give non-specialists a stronger understanding that Japan's integration with the rest of the world was not abrupt or passive. Ravina offers lenses through which world historians could use Japan more effectively as an example in comparison and as an integral part of a global narrative. Unfortunately, while many mainstream textbook publishers will be thrilled to have a "Further Reading" citation more recent than the authors' graduate training, the track record of serious attempts to engage Western-centric mainstream narratives with theoretically informed Japanese history suggests a long road ahead.

Ravina explored the end of the Tokugawa Shogunate and early Meiji government in some depth in *The Last Samurai: The Life and Battles of Saigo Takamori* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2003) (any relation to the Tom Cruise movie of the same title was purely coincidental) and spent the years since doing further reading on the period. I rather expected to find this new synthesis more unfamiliar, more challenging, but that may be a side effect of being a transnational and world historian. For specialists in Japanese history, what is most engaging about this book are the theoretical elements Ravina deploys. One of the less satisfying concepts is "global isomorphism," a pattern in which countries in eras of high levels of international interaction tend to find the same kind of solutions to their problems, and so institutions around the world tend to resemble each other. It is true that there seems to be a "spirit of the age" sometimes which world historians leverage into coherent stages, at least for pedagogical purposes, but this begs the question somewhat regarding the power relations which shape those developments.

Ravina looks at how Japanese reformers from all sides rhetorically deployed national history. “Radical nostalgia” uses native historical exemplars to legitimize dramatic change, often going back as far as ancient and classical history to find narratively similar events to desired policies; “cosmopolitan chauvinism” claims that foreign ideas could enhance Japanese power without diluting or altering important elements of Japanese culture, or implement essentially Japanese values, which Japanese can embody even better than the foreigners who invented them. These terms are original to Ravina, as is “global isomorphism,” though he admits in notes that they draw on existing theories of nationalism and identity, which have always included historical narratives. Oddly, the index collapses “nationalism and nation-state” into a single entry, and nation-state is often used as a synonym for a modern bureaucratic state, which means that the exact connection between this rhetoric and nationalism is left as an exercise for the reader.

The first chapter goes back to Japan’s Classical Age to demonstrate how global isomorphism, radical nostalgia, and cosmopolitan chauvinism were active elements of Japanese political culture from Japan’s earliest written history. There is value in showing Japanese leaders being culturally and politically flexible, adaptive, and worldly, even in the ages that define Japanese tradition, and this supports Ravina’s claims about how global isomorphism functions and the ubiquity of history as a rhetorical tool of politics. However, the frequency with which Ravina says centuries-distant choices “anticipate” modern moves is an unnecessary concession to nationalist discourses in which ‘tradition’ is defined by fictive continuity between past and present; it is more plausible in later chapters when Ravina discusses modernization programs of the Shogunate. The second chapter covers reform in the mid-Tokugawa era, outlining the flexibly ambiguous Sino-centric international system which the Tokugawa managed well in a time of peace, but which collapsed in the context of Western imperialism. This argument brought back memories of grad school debates regarding the question, “Was the Tokugawa Shogunate a success or a failure?” Ravina’s answer is that it was a success, until it was not.

The next few chapters illustrate how conventional binaries of tradition/progress, conservative/liberal, Japanese/Western, individualist/statist, etc., fail to describe, much less explain, politics in Japan from the 1840s into the 1880s. In the chapter on the end of the Shogunate, for example, Ravina shows that all sides, including the supposedly moribund Shogunate, invoked history in the service of ambitious reform programs. Again, few of these details are new to specialists, but if taken seriously by textbook writers, could mitigate the oversimplifications of Westernization/Tradition, etc.

Rhetorical analysis raises the question of sincerity or, if one cannot judge the hearts of historical figures, consistency. To what extent is the deployment of radical nostalgia an authentic loyalty to historical consistency, and to what extent is it pragmatic instrumentality? Are cosmopolitan chauvinists attached to cultural continuity and supremacy, or

are those tools of opportunistic manipulation? How much it matters may depend on the question a scholar is trying to answer: are they studying politicians and pundits, or audiences; are they studying policy, or cultural change? Unfortunately, some scholarship elides the difference, treating rhetoric *as* policy instead of investigating contradictions, such as manifest tensions between imperialism and cosmopolitanism. Ravina is not unaware of these difficulties, but he is so determined to show Japanese leaders using these rhetorical tactics, with the mostly implied connection to Japan's modern nationalism, that he does not address the question directly.

Ravina moves past the Meiji Restoration into the reform years, again using competing historical narratives to illustrate concerns and conflicts, giving credit for complex and creative thinking to many historical actors frequently cast as reckless Westernizers or mere reactionaries, like the "samurai populists" who combined traditional militarism with a presumption that the government should be responsive to the will of the people, out of which came both sword-wielding rebels and political parties. While it is hard to find relevant scholarship or sources Ravina does not cite appropriately, these chapters brought to mind one work absent from consideration: Umegaki Michio's, *After the Restoration: The Beginning of Japan's Modern State* (New York: New York University Press, 1988). Umegaki argues that leadership in the first decade of Meiji was largely improvisational and pragmatic, more reactive than programmatic, contrasting Ravina's description of a thoughtful consistency by many influential Japanese. The description and analysis of the Iwakura Mission controversies is particularly interesting in this regard, and the way in which Ravina describes the development of political parties out of the fallout from this argument does have a certain elegance.

To Stand with the Nations of the World is a thought-provoking and detail-rich work that should be engaging at many levels of specialization. The writing is lively and clear and largely jargon-free except for Ravina's own conceptual contributions, no barrier to undergraduate readers. It would be entirely suitable as a reading in a mid-level Japanese or Asian history course, or any graduate-level course. World History scholars and teachers will profit from considering the transnational situations described here, as complications to the standard narratives and categories. Japanese history specialists at all levels will certainly want to respond to the arguments Ravina puts forth here, and those discussions should be productive.

Jonathan Dresner is Associate Professor of East Asian History at Pittsburg State University of Kansas. His research is primarily on Japanese migration and modernity. He can be reached at jdresner@pittstate.edu.