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The Origin of Early Modernity

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Abstract

The earliest sustained use of the concept of "early modernity" by academic historians anywhere in the world occurred in the first decades of the twentieth century in Japan. This was a time when China and Japan were still under significant Western imperial pressure and Japan was engaging in its own imperial adventures in China and Korea. Early modernity was conceived partly in reaction to how the contemporaneous academic periodization of Ancient-Medieval-Modern was used to justify imperialism. Inserting a new period between the medieval and modern challenged European and Japanese historical narratives, which claimed that modern nation-state sovereignty was an outcome of medieval development. Early modernity instead introduced a new, alternative trajectory towards nationhood and sovereignty, one not dependent on a stage of feudal militarism. It expanded the possibilities of modernity into more culturally and historically pluralist terrains, offering a vision of modernity not necessarily bound to modern imperialism. This in turn created space for critical reflections on the nature of global modernity, reflections that continue to be seen in early modern history writing today.

Keywords

modern – modernity – medieval – early modern – China – Japan – imperialism

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> "Early modernity" as a concept of periodization is older in East Asian historiography than it is in European historiography
>
> DAVID HOWELL, 2023[1]

⁘

1 Introduction

The first sustained use of the concept of early modernity by academic historians anywhere in the world occurred in the first decades of the twentieth century in Japan. In 1914, Naitō Konan (1866–1934), a Japanese historian of China at Kyoto University, famously claimed that modern characteristics first emerged in a Chinese early modernity which peaked in the twelfth century during the Song Dynasty.[2] As David Howell has recently discussed, Naitō's theory was influenced by Japanese academic writing of about a decade earlier, which had conceived of an early modernity in Japanese history crystallizing at the turn of the sixteenth into the seventeenth century. Historical theories by Europeans discussing an "early modernity" for Europe only came much later.

This article argues that key aspects of the "early modernity" originating in Japanese historiography between 1900 and 1920 carry implications that resonate with our discussions on historical periodization today. These include that early modernity was first conceived of as a "transitional phase" or "process," that it was identified through cultural and sociological attributes, and that these attributes were seen as emerging in a set sequence which marked a society's transition out of the medieval period. Intriguingly, however, while in some cases that transition was seen as then leading to a modern period, in other cases it was not. This complicates discussions of the alleged "teleological" nature of early modernity – an issue we will return to below. What is more certain, however, is that these early twentieth-century Japanese historians, by

1 David L. Howell, "Introduction: Genealogies of Japanese Early Modernity," in *The New Cambridge History of Japan*, ed. Howell, vol. 2, *Early Modern Japan in Asia and the World, c. 1580–1877* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 10.

2 Naitō Torajirō, *Shinaron* (Bunkaido, 1914). (Naitō's given name was Torajirō, but he was also widely known as Naitō Konan).

introducing the early modern as a new period after the medieval and before the modern, began to transform the earlier three-phase academic periodization of Ancient-Medieval-Modern to the four-phase Ancient-Medieval-Early Modern-Modern. This action, as we shall see below, was connected both with a re-evaluation of the relative merits of the medieval and modern periods and a more nuanced understanding of the implications of global modernity.

There are a number of significant points and implications that we can already draw simply from the fact that early modernity initially emerged as an historiographical category in Japan at the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century. Firstly, the fact that the academic concept originated with Japanese scholars in Japan means it originated with scholars working in the modern Western-style university discipline of history – but located in what at the time was a rising, yet still intellectually and politically liminal, part of the "modern world." Secondly, that it was first used to discuss non-Western (East Asian) history, initially the history of Japan and thereafter more famously the history of China, roots this concept in semi-coloniality. Thirdly, given that China in the 1910s – when this theory was conceived – was generally regarded as a failed (and certainly not modern) state, the theory inherently contradicted the kind of universal teleological outlooks which see history ineluctably leading to a successful modernity. In fact, given it claimed modernity emerging first in a country seen at the time as emblematic of backward stasis, one might even say it advanced a kind of anti-teleology, or perhaps a teleology of negative value.

Historians of China today, including Valerie Hansen in this special issue, continue to reference Naitō's theory in thinking about early modernity in Chinese history. In her article, she demonstrates how the concept has continued to be used by a range of different historians from different countries to make sense of Chinese history.[3] In this article, rather than focusing on Chinese or Japanese history per se, I will instead concentrate on historiography. I will begin by analyzing the Japanese historiography that introduced the concept of early modernity, including examining the academic and social context of its emergence in the period between 1900 and 1920. Here I will also show its interaction with a cascade of historical events that occurred in those same two decades, many of which would come to define the sociopolitical development

3 As Hansen states, "historians have rethought many aspects of Naitō's work in the past century, but his key point still stands." Valerie Hansen in this special issue, "Song-Dynasty China (960–1276): Early Modern Before Europe," *Journal of Early Modern History* 30, no. 1–2 (2026).

of twentieth-century East Asia, and thereby the world we live in today. These included:

- The continued "semi-colonial" unequal treaty subjugation of Japan and China by Western powers (for China from 1842 to 1943, for Japan from 1854 to 1911)[4]
- Japan's formal annexation of Korea (1910)
- The overthrow of the Qing Dynasty by the Chinese Nationalist Revolution (1911)
- The failure of China's republican "second revolution" of 1913 against Yuan Shikai leading to the rise of warlordism and more foreign (including Japanese) military interference in China
- WWI and the resultant collapse of the global supremacy of paradigms of modern progress based on a universalist example of the West
- The post-WWI international betrayal of the Chinese Republic through Western recognition at Versailles of Japanese enclaves in China (1919)
- Chinese reaction to Versailles including the May 4th Movement, the rise of iconoclastic modernism, radical nationalism, scientism, and the foundation of the Chinese Communist Party (1919–1921)

The origination of the early modern as a historical period occurred in this politically charged environment, and as will be discussed below, interacted directly with that environment. Understanding its origins in that time will also inform our later discussion of the development of the idea of early modernity through the trans-war WWI and WWII periods up to the present.

Many of the criticisms of the term "early modernity" today center on its alleged teleological or Eurocentric nature.[5] Given that during the period of its origination both China and Japan were in a "semi-colonial" state (still subjugated to the unequal treaties), and that wider use of the term "early modern" by historians outside East Asia (including in Europe) only appears to have occurred after WWII – that is, after the post-WWII process of global decolonization had already begun – we might wonder whether early modernity

4 The most unpopular element of the unequal treaties, extraterritoriality, was ended for Japan in 1899. Tariff policy and internal navigation rights, however, continued to be limited until the revisions of 1911. Therefore, when Uchida Ginzō originated the concept "early modern" (*kinsei*) in 1903, Japan was still subject to the "unequal treaties" in a relationship with the Western powers characterized in the Chinese case as "semi-colonial." Pär Kristoffer Cassel, *Grounds of Judgment Extraterritoriality and Imperial Power in Nineteenth-Century China and Japan* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

5 Randolph Starn, "The Early Modern Muddle," *Journal of Early Modern History* 6, no. 3 (2002): 296–307; Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Muddle of Modernity," *The American Historical Review* 116, no. 3 (2011): 663–675.

should be associated with anti-Eurocentrism rather than Eurocentrism. The non-Western roots of the concept, and its global spread only during and after decolonization, are certainly worthy of further consideration. This is particularly the case given the continued significance of Japanese historiography in the ongoing reconceptualization of early modernity today, as the influence of Hayami Akira's theory of "industrious modernity" on current European and global early modern history writing exemplifies.

This article will consider early modernity as a historical theory and practice through addressing the following three questions: 1) Where did "early modernity" (as a concept) come from? Here we will explore how the concept of early modernity emerged in Japanese historiography in the first decade of the twentieth century, and under what Japanese, Chinese and European influences. 2) What constituted early modernity in these early theories and how did they develop later, particularly in relation to Japanese and East Asian history? Here we will look at the attributes associated with early modernity as a paradigm. And 3) why does it matter? What was the social context of the emergence of the concept, what political ramifications did it bring, and how might that assist us in considering how the concept functions today?

2 The Origins of Early Modernity as a Historiographical Paradigm

Where did the idea of early modernity come from? Early Japanese debates around the historical concept of early modernity are most popularly associated with Naitō Konan's early twentieth century writings on Chinese history, notably his *Shinaron* [*On China*] of 1914.[6] Naitō's idea of a Chinese early modernity, however, was influenced by slightly earlier currents in the modern (Westernized) Japanese academy's rewriting of Japanese history, notably the concept of the early modern originated by Uchida Ginzō (1872–1919) in his *Nihon kinseishi* [*Japan's early modern history*] of 1903.[7] Recently, David Howell and Sakamoto Shōzō have each separately demonstrated that early modernity as a term, *kinsei* in Japanese, first appeared in Japanese history writing in 1903. They have both shown that the term's early meaning overlaps with

6 Joshua A. Fogel, *Politics and Sinology: The Case of Naitō Konan (1866–1934)* (Harvard University Press, 1984).

7 Uchida Ginzō, *Nihon Kinseishi*, vol. 1.1 (Fuzanbō, 1903) [hereafter Uchida 1903]. Note that this 1903 work, published as Uchida was departing for a three-year study sojourn in Europe, only contained the first part of the conceived work. Only on his return from Europe did Uchida publish a fuller work, *Kinsei no Nihon* (Fuzanbō, 1919), in which he also pulled back and adjusted a number of the claims he had made in the earlier piece, as will be discussed below.

the historiographical concept of early modernity we have today. They also both discussed changes in meaning through time and differences with other, later conceptions of early modernity.[8] Sakamoto has demonstrated that early twentieth-century Japanese usage of the term came to transition from a relatively simple, popular meaning of "recent times" or "modern" into a historiographical concept indicating a transitionary period leading to modernity. He sees this conceptual meaning as firmly established by the 1920s.[9]

Uchida and Naitō worked as colleagues at Kyoto Imperial University during the foundation of its humanities institute in 1906, with Uchida joining in 1906 to found the Department of History and Naitō in 1907 to take charge of teaching Oriental (East Asian) History.[10] It was in this position, and while working alongside Uchida, that Naitō authored *On China*. As we will see below, Naitō referenced Uchida's concept of early modernity in Japan when introducing his concept for China. In order to consider the origin of the term and concept, therefore, it is essential to look at how Uchida first conceived of early modernity in 1903. The first 25 pages of Uchida's *Nihon kinseishi* (*Japan's Early Modern History*) directly addressed the issue of periodization. He discussed options of dating the onset of early modernity as far back as the period of the Kamakura Shogunate (1185 onwards), or as late as the Meiji Restoration (1868), but settled on the period of the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603–1867) as the early modern period, using the Japanese term, *kinsei*.[11]

At the time of writing this opening section of his 1903 book, Uchida held the position of Lecturer at Tokyo Imperial University (today's University of Tokyo)

8 David L. Howell, "Introduction: Genealogies of Japanese Early Modernity," and Sakamoto Shōzō, "Edo Jidai o 'kinsei' to iu koto," [On calling the Edo Period "early modern"], *Nihon Rekishi* 769 (2012): 105–14.

9 Sakamoto, "Edo Jidai o 'kinsei' to iu koto," 107, 111.

10 Both swiftly became full professors at the institute, Uchida in 1907 and Naitō in 1909. Incidentally, the modern Japanese historian most associated with the periodization of the medieval period, Hara Katsurō, was also appointed a professor in the same institute in 1909. Kyōto teikoku daigaku, ed., *Kyōto Teikoku Daigaku Ichiran* (Kyouto teikoku daigaku, 1927), 326–327. Hara is also thanked in one of the prefaces of Uchida's 1903 work (Uchida, *Nihon Kinseishi*, 14).

11 Uchida 1903, 5, NDL Slide 4. The 1903 edition of *Nihon kinseishi* vol. 1, part 1, like several other early twentieth century Japanese works to be cited in this article, includes discrete page numberings for different parts of the book. Therefore, for all references to these texts I am providing the NDL (Japanese National Diet Library) slide number from the NDL Digital Collection (through which this edition can be accessed via open access online) in addition to the page numbers to make the page referencing clearer. While the dates for Tokugawa rule are usually given as 1603–1867, Uchida chose to begin the early modern period with Tokugawa Ieyasu's victory at the Battle of Sekigahara of 1600 and end it with the US naval incursion into Edo Bay and imposition of the unequal treaties in 1853–4.

and was about to be dispatched for a state sponsored three-year study tour of Europe. As one of the first graduates in "national history" of Tokyo Imperial University, Uchida had received an education in the modern discipline of history typical of comparable European universities of the time. Uchida therefore looked at history overtly through the lenses of sources and evidence articulated by nineteenth-century European theorists like Leopold von Ranke. Following that tradition, Uchida began by considering the source limitations inherent in examining Tokugawa history from his own standpoint of a Japanese historian working in 1903. He pointed out that he and his contemporary historians' problem was not a of lack of sources, but rather the fact that as they were writing only a few decades after the end of the Tokugawa period, they were required to themselves delimit a huge body of potential historical source material, almost all of which had not yet been compiled, transcribed, annotated, or processed through other historiographical procedures. In other words, his problem was that the period he was living in was, if anything, temporally too close to the period that he was identifying as early modern, and he commented in his introduction that this could not help but lead to an incomplete history.[12]

On the other hand, Uchida also noted certain advantages of the temporal proximity: "in this way, and on this basis, we can make clear and chart how contemporary Japan developed."[13] Intriguingly, for Uchida, writing a history of the early modern was therefore also a kind of contemporary history project, because the period he was writing in was so close to what he saw as the end of the early modern period (which he marked with the US naval incursion and imposition of unequal treaties on Japan in 1853–4). This "contemporary history" angle of Uchida's writing of the early modern goes some way to explaining the terminology used, notably his use of the Japanese word *kinsei*, which has since become the standard term for the early modern. At the time, this term's vernacular meaning was "recent times," and in this sense it was also sometimes used to gloss the "modern." Uchida, while acknowledging that vernacular meaning of the term and discussing the contemporary nature of Tokugawa period history for him and his colleagues, was also very clear that *kinsei* as he would use it meant more than just "recent times," and was rather a periodic delineation primarily identified not temporally but through historical attributes.

This begins to become clear through Uchida's discussion in his 1903 book of when early modernity should be said to have begun in Japan. There Uchida alternated the term *kindai* ("modern," as in modern characteristics) and *kinsei*

12 Uchida 1903, 1–2, slides 2 and 3.

13 Uchida 1903, 5, slide 4.

("early modern," demarcating a period) as he foregrounded the role of Chinese literacy and interaction with Chinese literary culture as a key attribute of Japanese early modernity as he saw it:

> The culture of modern (*kindai*) Japan developed mainly under the influence and stimulation of early modern (*kinsei*) Chinese literature. That stimulation did not arise overnight, but rather had slowly been developing since the Kamakura period [1185–1333], thinking in this manner and for this reason, some have held the Kamakura period as the beginning of the Japanese early modern period.[14]

Uchida not only foregrounds Chinese literacy and Chinese textual culture, but specifically mentions the pervasion of "Song learning" (Neo-Confucianism) into Japan as a key change. He sees this development as dating from "Kamakura [1185–1333] or Ashikaga [1336–1573] times" and "facilitated by military-dominated society, and the spread of book learning, mainly through the literary activities of Buddhist monks," particularly from the end of the fifteenth century onwards.[15] Uchida held that these developments then led eventually to the adoption of Confucian statecraft by powerful lords at the time of the Tokugawas and the rise of Japanese literary culture and popular literacy in the seventeenth century.[16]

The key was thus literary culture and scientific learning, which Uchida specifically related not only to a Chinese imperial origin, but also placed in relation to a European historical comparator:

> We can certainly say that these various phenomena resemble the evidence of a reprise in scholarly learning, which in the European context occurred at the end of the medieval period and is called the Renaissance.[17]

14 Uchida 1903, 4, slide 19.

15 Uchida 1903, 4–10, slides 19 to 22.

16 Uchida 1903, 4–10, slides 19 to 22.

17 Uchida 1903, 11, slide 22. Interestingly, in his own 1919 revision of this work under the new title *Kinsei no Nihon*, Uchida instead relates this same Tokugawa lordly role in the social pervasion of Confucian ethics and learning not to the European Renaissance, but to the later "enlightened autocratic sovereigns of eighteenth-century Europe" (Uchida, *Kinsei no Nihon* (Sōgensha, 1938), 34). This rewritten version of around twenty years later, as well as revising certain theories, continues the history past the early Tokugawa period all the way up to the century before the Meiji Restoration. Interestingly in terms of language use, Uchida describes this in his preface as "covering the [entire] transitional period (*katoki*) from early modern (*kinsei*) to modern (*saikinsei*)" (Uchida 1938, 1). Howell notes a similar use of Japanese language terms to delineate the early modern from the modern in

In the above quote, Uchida both overtly links Japanese history to a European chronological and periodization marker and makes clear the position of the new period as beginning at the end of the medieval period. It is important to note, however, that this paradigmatic vision of the early modern was not limited only to the idea of literary thought culture and renaissance, but also involved a range of other aspects we today also link to the early modern:

> Secondly, we would suggest as other phenomena which appeared in this transition: the development of commercial and manufacturing industries, the rise of urbanization and a dramatic increase in the distribution and utilization of currency and paper financial instruments. In Europe, this kind of urbanization occurred at the end of the medieval period, in our country (Japan) this occurred between the time of the Ashikaga and the beginning of the Tokugawa period.[18]

As Sakamoto Shōzō has pointed out, Uchida's linking of the emergence of Tokugawa culture, a developmental trajectory, and the influence of Chinese literary culture can be traced to earlier, non-Western-style indigenous Japanese historical writing, notably Suzuki Akira's (1764–1837) *Hanareya gakkun* of 1828. Suzuki, in the early nineteenth century, before Japan opened to the process of full-scale westernization and modernization, had already argued that the emergence in the Kamakura period of Sino-Japanese culture, and notably its popularization in the Tokugawa period, had been the key social transition point leading to the Tokugawa society of the Japan in which he lived. Uchida's firmly modern academic method of historical writing thereby actually drew to some extent on pre-academic (premodern academy) Sino-Japanese conceptions of the past like Suzuki's.[19]

In this way, a chronological delineation of an early modern period, or a period sitting between the medieval period on the one hand and the modern period on the other, was first identified by Uchida based on attributes. Around the same time, however, other Western-trained modern Japanese historians, while not using the term "early modern," were also beginning to articulate a periodization of Japanese history which inserted a discrete period between

writing from the 1940s and 50s by Miyakawa Hisayuki and Miyazaki Ichisada (Howell, "Introduction: Genealogies of Japanese Early Modernity," 9.).

18 Uchida 1903, 11–12, slides 22 and 23. Note that the Ashikaga and Tokugawa periods were also being delineated in contemporaneous Japanese historiography (in fact, by Uchida's colleague and friend, Hara Katsurō) as the late "medieval" period.

19 Shōzō, "Edo Jidai o 'kinsei' to iu koto," 105.

the medieval and modern. While Uchida was writing this first modern history of the Japanese Tokugawa period and advancing the term *kinsei* as a paradigmatically early modern concept, the Japanese economist and economic historian Fukuda Tokuzō (1874–1930) was in Germany writing an economic history of Japan. As with Uchida, Fukuda's schematic of Japanese history inserted a discrete period between the medieval and the modern to cover the Tokugawa period.[20]

Fukuda delineated Japanese history into a "feudal period" stretching from 931 to 1602 followed by an autocratic period dating from 1603 to 1867. While for Uchida the key identifier of the early modern was a (European) Renaissance-style cultural blossoming, for Fukuda it was a political economy of autocracy – "Die Zeit des absoluten Polizeistaates" (the period of the absolutist state) – as he entitled his chapter on the Tokugawa period.[21] Both paralleled events in Europe, both were informed by European historiographical science, and both saw Chinese influence as central to developmental change in the Japanese case. But whereas for Uchida the defining characteristic was the Renaissance, for Fukuda it was absolutism. In this way, we can see that both of these modern, Western-trained Japanese historians working at the same time chose to delineate the period of the Tokugawa state as a discrete historical period. Neither medieval nor modern, but somewhere in between, and critically, defined by certain inherent attributes which could clearly be compared to attributes in comparable European historical moments.

In addition to these parallels and tensions between the contemporaneous works of Uchida and Fukuda, there were also other contemporaneous Japanese historians who more overtly interacted with the interpretations Uchida took in his 1903 work. For instance, Uchida's friend Hara Katsurō (1871–1924), the most famous historian of the Japanese medieval period of that generation, opened his *Nihon chūseishi* [*Japan's Medieval History*] of 1906 by closely following Uchida in first considering the significance of Chinese literary culture in the periodic development of Japanese history. On his first page he even refers to the early Tokugawa period in Uchida's terms as the (Japanese) "Renaissance," thereby paralleling both Uchida's approach and choice of comparative referent.[22]

20 Fukuda Tokuzō, *Die gesellschaftliche und wirtschaftliche Entwickelung in Japan* [*The Social and Economic Development of Japan*] (J.G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung Nachfolger, 1900). This was written as Fukuda's doctoral dissertation working under Professor Lujo Brentano (1844–1931). He later also published a Japanese version: Fukuda Tokuzō, *Nihon Keizaishi Ron* [*On Japan's Economic History*] (Hōbunkan, 1918).

21 Fukuda, *Die gesellschaftliche und wirtschaftliche Entwickelung*, 116.

22 Hara Katsurō, *Nihon Chūseishi* (Fuzanbō, 1906), 1, Slide 3.

Modern Japanese thinking about the country's medieval history and feudalism was an important background always affecting any theorization of either modernity or an early modern period. This is because there existed a premodern indigenous tradition, particularly prevalent in the 1700s and early 1800s, of valorizing the history of Japan's samurai feudalism (meaning the system of shogunate rule which dominated between the late twelfth and mid-nineteenth centuries) to contrast it with the imperial Chinese society and governance of the same period in a nationalist discourse asserting the supremacy of the military samurai order of traditional Japan over the civil bureaucratic governance of traditional China. Emphasizing Japanese feudalism had thus long been a form of Japanese nationalism and China-bashing.[23]

Modern, Western-inclined Japanese reformers, notably including the famous liberal thinker Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901), adopted and adapted this historical tradition to further associate the feudalism of medieval Japanese history with a corresponding medieval European history. They thereby argued for a shared Japanese and European historical trajectory (towards modernity through feudalism), contrasted against the Chinese case (which they argued did not possess an historical trajectory towards modernity due to the absence of militarized feudalism).[24] This view of medieval history was used to justify seeing Japan as different (superior) to China, and thereby to mount a "civilizational" argument for Japan to be counted alongside the European countries, or at least treated better than China, under the unequal treaty system to which both countries were subjected at that time.[25]

As Thomas Keirstead has pointed out, modern academic historians like Hara similarly constructed their histories of medieval Japan to emphasize European comparators and thereby the shared teleology of modernity with Europe:

> Hara Katsurō, for example, discerned in the Franks – in his eyes a "race" of warriors whose martial energy reinvigorated the institutions of a moribund empire – a model that allowed him to gauge the contribution

23 Kiri Paramore, "The Politics of Dialogic Imagination: Power and Popular Culture in Early Modern Japan by Katsuya Hirano (Review)," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 41, no. 1 (2015): 234–38; Kiri Paramore, "Reply to Katsuya Hirano," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 42, no. 1 (2016): 217–218.

24 Fukuzawa Yukichi, *Bunmeiron no gairyaku* (Iwanami shoten, 1995), 37–38. See also in English translation, Fukuzawa Yukichi, *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization* (Sophia University, 1973), 21–2.

25 Kiri Paramore, "Liberalism, Cultural Particularism, and the Rule of Law in Modern East Asia: The Anti-Confucian Essentialisms of Chen Duxiu and Fukuzawa Yukichi compared," *Modern Intellectual History* 17, no. 2 (2020): 527–542.

> of the *bushi*, or samurai, to Japanese history. He similarly invoked the Reformation to explain a thirteenth century transformation in Buddhist thought. And Tacitus' description of German villages, quoted in English, allows Hara to imagine how Eastern Japan, *tōgoku*, home of Japan's warrior culture, "must have looked."[26]

Inserting another period, the early modern, between the medieval and modern periods potentially disrupted such narratives by displacing the political primacy of the role of medieval feudalism in Japan's European-like march to modernity, emphasized by writers from Fukuzawa to Hara. The idea of the early modern initially advanced by Uchida did this not only by breaking the direct continuity between the medieval and the modern, but by crediting the early modern transition to Chinese literary culture instead of Japanese martial feudalism. Uchida's methodology of early modernity could thereby be seen as somewhat undermining the way historical teleology had been used to advance modern Japanese nationalism up until that point – a point we will return to below, in section three.

This potential critical edge of the concept was radically realized in Naitō's *On China*, where Naitō employed Uchida's methodology of early modernity to assert a natural teleology of modernity for China – exactly what previous Japanese nationalist historiography had sought to deny that country. Naitō furthermore left no doubt in the political implications of his history by overtly framing the opening chapter of *On China*, exactly where he argued the early modern thesis, in terms of a question of contemporary international politics directly related to the republican status of China at the moment of writing:

> Whether a future China should become a monarchy or a republic is the most important question of our times. In order to resolve this question we need to work to go beyond the signs of [Chinese] history and attain its spirit… The early modern [*kinsei*] is not called that simply because it means recent times, rather the division is related to particular attributes of each period. If we look at the case of Western Europe, the meaning of (early) modern [*kinsei*] is tied to the possession of attributes defining the arrival of a change in social organization and the coming of a realignment of the economy brought on by the discovery of new lands and an increase in the power of the common people, all occurring in the wake of the Renaissance. In the case of Japan, influential historians have emphasized

26 Thomas Keirstead, "Inventing Medieval Japan: The History and Politics of National Identity," *The Medieval History Journal* 1, no. 1 (1998): 56.

> that the same kind of periodization following the same meaning is valid. They argue that we should not simply see the last 50 years since the opening of the country [the period in Japan since 1854] as the early modern [*kinsei*] period, but that we should rather call the period in which the basis of social organization had been slowly changing, that is the period beginning with the rise of the warrior houses [samurai] and leading to the increased empowerment of the commoners, should be called the early modern. There are then competing theories on whether that period should be regarded as having begun at the end of the Ashikaga [Uchida's theory locating it in the Tokugawa] or right back at the beginning of the Kamakura.[27]

As we see above, Naitō's *On China* swung directly from a major question of contemporary East Asian politics to the employment of Uchida's attributes of early modernity to assert an early modern period for China. The "influential historian(s)" referred to in the above quote is of course primarily Uchida.

3 The Attributes of Early Modernity

I would like to continue with the above quote from Naitō in order to further explore the way attributes were used to define the early modern. As we saw, Naitō, following Uchida, emphasized attributes as a way of defining the period. Intriguingly, this continues to be an approach to defining early modernity among scholars today in the early twenty-first century, as the article in this special issue by Alan Strathern touches upon.[28] The long quote above from Naitō continues as follows:

> In relation to China, following the same way of looking at things [as in the European and Japanese examples Naitō gives in the long quote above] it is of course possible to also construct a periodization. Normal laymen might consider that the early modern period would then begin in China after the Ming dynasty [1368–1644] or Qing dynasty [1644–1911]. However, from a historical perspective, considering the attributes and meaning of the period, we would instead have to reach further back, considering the period from the mid-Tang [705–907] through the Five

27 Naitō, *Shinaron*, 7–8, slides 24–25.

28 See Alan Strathern, "Conceptualizing Early Modernity Beyond the West," *Journal of Early Modern History* 30, no. 1–2 (2026).

> Dynasties and arriving at the Northern Song [960–1127], in other words the period from 1100 years ago to 800 years ago, as the valid period in which the early modern period slowly developed. Considering then what we could say created the form of early modernity, what effected change at a historical level, put simply, first and foremost was the transition from aristocratic politics to the politics of imperial autocracy, this is the most important fact.[29]

It is interesting that Naitō here follows the emphasis on the historicity of the establishment of autocratic rule first posited in East Asian historical periodization in Fukuda's economic history of Japan.[30] Naitō goes on to explicate all the other attributes of early modernity he identifies – including cultural renewal, the rise of a market economy, and popular sovereignty, among others – through the prism of this overarching principle: the transition to autocracy.[31]

Alan Strathern in his article in this special issue refers to "specific features" of early modernity, at one point listing features lined up against a corresponding list of characteristics.[32] The early Japanese originators of the idea of early modernity also presented a significant number of what, following Naitō, I will call "attributes" that marked the period as early modern. As Howell has remarked upon in relation to Naitō, "his 'early' modern period starts in the tenth century with a checklist of transformations – such as the decline of the aristocracy, growth of the commercial economy, and rise of popular culture – that typically feature in taxonomies of global early modernity."[33] Speaking of later historiography from the post WWII period, Howell mentions other attributes including "information networks, education, urbanization, secularization, and the emergence of a public sphere."[34] Interestingly, many of these attributes were identified by Uchida in 1903, but often in a way which could be seen as running against, or at least nuancing, a typical functionalist characterization of modernization.

A key aspect in Uchida's approach to periodization is his emphasis on "transition" (*kato* in Japanese).[35] So the attributes he focuses upon are the key attributes of transition into or through what he sees as the early modern. His engagement with attributes begins in the first pages of his book where he

29 Naitō, *Shinaron*, 9, slide 25.
30 Fukuda Tokuzō, *Die gesellschaftliche und wirtschaftliche Entwickelung*.
31 Naitō, *Shinaron*, 10–56.
32 Strathern, "Conceptualizing Early Modernity."
33 Howell, "Introduction: Genealogies of Japanese Early Modernity," 3.
34 Howell, "Introduction: Genealogies of Japanese Early Modernity," 3.
35 Uchida 1903, 7, slide 20.

considers theories that argue for the beginning of the early modern period in the Kamakura Period (1185–1333), which he will go on to reject. Here he lists changes that followed the establishment of the Kamakura Shogunate, including an increase in foreign trade (with China), an increase in (Sinitic) literary culture, a cultural Renaissance brought on by the resultant spiritual changes and artistic renewal, and a general increase in learning in everyday life and particularly in artisanal technology. He emphasizes here that all this is due to an increased influence of Chinese literary culture from this time.[36]

Crucially, Uchida broadly accepts the features listed above as part of the "transition" leading to early modernity, which he associates more with the Tokugawa than the Kamakura period because he sees the aforementioned attributes as being socially integrated and more clearly popularized among "the national people" (Japanese *kokumin*, Chinese *guomin* – the same words used to gloss "national citizens" in a modern context) during the peace of the Tokugawa period. For Uchida, therefore, in what I would see as a clear contrast with European teleologies of modernity, the first reason why the Tokugawa rather than the Kamakura or Muromachi periods should be considered the early modern is that the decline in war and rise in peace allowed literary and cultural pursuits to eclipse military and warrior pursuits. It was this that made the Tokugawa the period of cultural "Renaissance."[37] Given the valorization of medieval warrior culture in the contemporary historiography, this contrasting aspect in Uchida's imagination of the early modern is noteworthy.

As remarked upon earlier, further attributes that then marked the Tokugawa as the early modern for Uchida included particularly the rise of "Song Learning" (Neo-Confucianism) in Japan during the early Tokugawa, the large scale importation of books from Korea and China, and the beginning of large scale popular publishing in Japan itself.[38] Other attributes include the development of commercial and manufacturing industries, urbanization, and the wide distribution and use of currency and paper financial instruments.[39] Uchida also saw at the political level, and possibly as a reaction to the nearly two hundred-year period

36 Uchida 1903, 2–4, slides 18 and 19.

37 Uchida 1903, 8–9, slide 21.

38 Uchida 1903, 8–11, slides 21 and 22. These major historical changes of the seventeenth century are all also considered key to the history of early modern Japan by writers globally today; see for instance the various articles contained in David L. Howell, ed., *The New Cambridge History of Japan*, vol. 2, *Early Modern Japan in Asia and the World, c. 1580–1877* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

39 Uchida 1903, 11, slide 22.

of civil war leading up to 1600, a yearning for national unity as another early modern attribute.[40]

Underlying all these attributes, however, it is clear that for Uchida there is a single overarching characteristic: the influence of Chinese culture, which he repeatedly links to the idea of Renaissance. Behind the list of attributes which define early modernity for Uchida, therefore, there is a prime attribute, and notably that is the one linked to a transnational (Western) comparator. As Sudipta Kaviraj has pointed out, classical theorizations of modernity often attribute a "single causal principle," for Marx capitalism, for Weber rationalization, and for de Tocqueville democracy.[41] Looking at the original writing on early modernity from early twentieth-century Japan, and indeed its development ever since both in Japan and beyond, we see a similar trend where one "single principle" is emphasized. Uchida's original and clear emphasis on a "Renaissance" brought on by Chinese cultural influence in his explanation of Japanese early modernity is noted by Naitō Konan in his *On China*, which is even more emphatic in identifying as the single principle of Song Chinese early modernity, "the transition from aristocratic politics to the politics of imperial autocracy."[42]

We can also trace in much later Japanese historical writing about early modern Japan a similar tendency to focus on one single principle among a list of attributes of early modernity or modernity. For example, in probably the most influential historical monograph post-WWII, Maruyama Masao's *Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan*, Maruyama emphasized the construction of the individual subject in the early modern period as the defining point of modernity. He described failures in that construction in Japan's Tokugawa period as leading to a particular dysfunctional modernity in the country, which he associated with the "fascism" of wartime Japan.[43] In this sense, Maruyama used an historical teleology based around the early modern period, but to argue rather for a faulty developmental trajectory – a value-negative teleology.

Moreover, it should be noted that this favoring of a single principle to explain a set of attributes associated with early modernity did not always follow the pattern seen in the above examples of paralleling the Japanese case

40 Uchida 1903, 13, slide 23.

41 Sudipta Kaviraj, "Modernity and Politics in India," *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (2000): 137 and 139.

42 Naitō, *Shinaron*, 9, slide 25.

43 Maruyama Masao, *Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan* (Princeton University Press, 1974). I should mention that Maruyama, for reasons which would take too long to go into in this article, avoids the use of the term *kinsei* ("early modern"). He nonetheless characterizes "Tokugawa ideas … as developing unceasingly toward modernity," xxxii.

to a Western comparator. Probably the most impactful theorization of early modern Japan developed in the late twentieth century – a theory still affecting the global historical field today – is Hayami Akira's idea of the "industrious revolution."[44] This theory was most famously adopted by Jan de Vries to explain the onset of early modernity in the European Lowlands (now the Netherlands and Belgium) and to think about early modernity globally.[45] The fact that the "industrious revolution," currently a major theoretical vehicle for understanding early modern European history, originated with a Japanese historian writing about Japanese history is a contemporary demonstration of the fact that history from, by, and about the non-West, and Japan specifically, continues to play a central role in the continuing global academic historiographical manufacture of the category of early modernity, as it has since 1903.[46]

4 The Social Context and Political Implications of Positing an Early Modernity

Naitō's *On China*, despite being cited ever since primarily as a history, was presented at the time of its publication in 1914 as a major scholarly political intervention in the ongoing "China debate" in Japan. That debate concerned the future of post-Qing contemporary China: should China be ruled by the Chinese or by more advanced foreign stewards? Should China be developed as a single unified state, or partitioned into multiple states? Should China be ruled through an imperial monarchy or a republic? Should China even continue to exist at all as a territorial state? Naitō framed much of his *On China* around the question of "whether a future China should become a monarchy or a republic?"[47] This was a particularly topical framing in 1914, given the proclamation of the Chinese Republic by Sun Yat-sen in 1912 and the failure in China

44 Hayami Akira, 速水融, *Kinsei Nihon No Keizai Shakai,* 近世日本の経済社会 (Reitaku Daigaku Shuppankai, 2003); Hayami Akira, Saitō Osamu, and Ronald P. Toby, eds., *Emergence of Economic Society in Japan, 1600–1859* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

45 Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge University Press, 2008). The research by Shaw-Taylor referred to in Alan Strathern's article in this special issue similarly follows the contours of Hayami's earlier theorization.

46 As Amy Borovoy has discussed, Japanese academic theorization of the twentieth century has had a significant yet underreported influence on a range of major global academic theories, particularly those that are more likely to be associated with American scholars. Amy Borovoy, "Robert Bellah's Search for Community and Ethical Modernity in Japan Studies," *Journal of Asian Studies* 75, no. 2 (2016): 467–94.

47 Naitō, *Shinaron*, 7, slide 24.

of the republican "second revolution" of 1913, which led to a schism between Yuan Shikai's increasingly monarchical style of rule in Beijing and the ideals of the Chinese Republic as articulated by Sun Yat-sen and other southern leaders. Naitō even devoted the second half of the introduction of *On China* to a discussion of the reasons for the failure of the "second revolution," framing his book in the most contemporarily topical terms.[48]

Naitō was also overt about the political position his book was taking, not only in his framing, but also in his introduction, where he stated, "Because I thought about this book from the perspective of the Chinese and for the good of China, I have avoided the national perspective of other countries, for instance Japan, who may feel aggrieved by many positions China takes."[49] He linked his core historical argument directly with the national issue by claiming the emergence of a sovereign national (Chinese) people as a key element in his Song early modernity thesis. In Naitō's hands, the creation of a national people was part of the story of how society developed after the establishment of imperial autocracy, because imperial autocracy brought a certain levelling to the rest of society, allowing not only more commercial and cultural interaction (trade and cultural blossoming), but also the establishment of a people with a certain degree of popular agency: "Returning to our core discussion, the dissolution of the medieval aristocracy resulted on the one hand in an increase in the power of the sovereign, but at the same time it must not be forgotten that it also led to the acknowledgment of the power of the common people."[50] Naitō listed a number of concrete examples of the acknowledgment of the "rights of the people" dating from the Song period, including the right to own land, a liberalization of market laws acknowledging the trading rights of commoners, and the increasing removal of demands for corvée labor in place of monetary taxation.[51]

Naitō also mentions the rise of the examination system for bureaucratic appointments from this period, but his analysis of its significance does not rest on the usual arguments about meritocracy.[52] Naitō instead portrayed the

48 Naitō discusses the reasons behind failure of the "second revolution" in his introduction (Naitō, *Shinaron*, 10–14, slides 15–17).

49 Naitō, *Shinaron*, 3, slide 11.

50 Naitō, *Shinaron*, 45, slide 43.

51 Naitō, *Shinaron*, 46–7, slide 44.

52 Western literature has long been enamoured by the meritocratic promise of the Chinese examination system, with the work of Alexander Woodside noted in Valerie Hansen's article in this special issue representing a more nuanced and theoretically interesting recent example. Alexander Woodside, *Lost Modernities: China, Vietnam, Korea, and the Hazards of World History* (Harvard University Press, 2006).

significance of the examination system as again an acknowledgement of the power of the people and their role in politics:

> Considering the changes that occurred after the Tang dynasty, we see that a period in which the freedom of the people and the people's private rights went totally unacknowledged slowly changed to a period in which they were acknowledged and in which the people ultimately became a political element.[53]

Naitō's repeated use of the term "rights" and "rights of the people" is striking, and seems to be implying that the transfer to imperial autocracy brought with it a degree of popular sovereignty – of course, the basic building block of republicanism.

In case the contemporary political implications of his historical point were not clear enough, Naitō pivoted mid-history to note that despite the listed positive effects of the rise of imperial autocracy, in terms of governance there were many terrible negatives, the decline of political accountability being one. Which is why, "if imperial autocracy were to arise again (in China), (China) would again return to the same evil practices."[54] The current (in 1914) dislodgement of the republican government in China, Naitō argued, was to be seen in a similar light as the loss of republican rule and return of monarchism in immediate post-revolutionary France. Of course, Naitō reminds us, republican rule soon returned in France. Seeing that China had even more historical experience with imperial autocracy, Naitō argued, "even if autocracy were to return, it would ultimately not last for long."[55]

After acknowledging the problems faced by the contemporary Chinese republic, including in the lack of readiness of the population for a republican style of government, Naitō again raised the example of France and the problems it had also faced in maintaining republican rule, especially during times of military threat. Yet France of course ultimately remained a republic, from which Naitō concluded: "I think we can overwhelmingly confirm the judgement that ultimately republican governance [in contemporary China] will stabilize."[56]

This conclusion to the first fifty pages of *On China*, and the ultimate answer to the initial question the book had posed, was at the time both a big call and

53 Naitō, *Shinaron*, 52–3, slide 47.
54 Naitō, *Shinaron*, 52–3, slide 47.
55 Naitō, *Shinaron*, 44–5, slide 43.
56 Naitō, *Shinaron*, 44–5, slide 43.

controversial. It was a big call in the sense that, with Yuan Shikai at the time the most powerful man in China and angling to be installed as a new emperor, and with much of China under the control of warlords or foreign states and the republicans struggling to hold even limited parts of the south, the republic was not looking too healthy. Beyond that immediate politico-military situation, in Japan and the rest of the world the view that China simply would not continue as a unified state had long held sway. This view was not limited only to Japanese and Western imperialists, but was also the outlook of some influential Chinese. The best example is Kang Youwei (1858–1927), who seems by the end of the 1890s, while sticking to the possibility of a territorially contiguous sovereign China, to develop a conception of Chinese nationalism transformed into a primarily diasporic ethnic nationalism which he himself likened to the contemporaneous idea of the so-called "wandering" Jewish nation.[57] In other words, in 1914 there were not a lot of "China watchers" prepared to nail their colors to the mast for the Republic. Yet Naitō did so.

His conclusion was politically controversial because, although Sun Yat-sen and other republicans had withdrawn to Japan after the failure of the second revolution and Japan played all factions in the Chinese politics of the time, Yuan Shikai was particularly inclined towards Japan and had strong supporters within the Japanese political elite. In the Japan of 1868–1945, it was also controversial simply to advocate republicanism in any context. The position of the imperial monarchy in Japan as the ideological core of the state was robustly underpinned by a comprehensive intellectual and public consensus on the supremacy of the (humane and familial) tradition of monarchy over the (immoral and random) innovation of republicanism. This certainly held at the level of public discourse.

As academic theory, however, *On China* was even more subversive because, by locating the birth of modern characteristics not in feudal relations but rather in a kind of popular rights sovereignty that emerged under autocracy, Naitō undermined the consensus of over a hundred years of writing about the *Japanese* past. The suggestion that the nation was not based in the timeless familial relations between classes that underlay the humanity of feudalism in the past and the divine rule of the Japanese empire in the present, but rather lay in the sovereignty of the people, was to question the basis of the Japanese political settlement Naitō lived under. Popular rights had been the rallying cry of political agitators opposing the Meiji oligarchy in the 1870s and 80s, but Itō

57 Pablo Ariel Blitstein, "A New China in Mexico: Kang Youwei and His Languages of Cohesion-Making on the Two Sides of the Pacific (1895–1911)," *Oriens Extremus* 55 (2016): 209–60.

Hirobumi's Imperial Constitution, and the establishment of a representative Japanese Diet (parliament) between 1889 and 1891, had neutralized the claim to popular sovereignty in a constitutional monarchical compromise reminiscent of the anti-republican arrangements in Prussia or Britain.

This aspect in the social context of early twentieth-century Japan is also relevant to Uchida's decision in 1919, when he was able to fully publish a longer revised version of his history of early modern Japan – retitled *Nihon no kinsei* (*Japan's Early Modernity*) – to retreat from some of the universalist claims he had made in 1903. Sakamoto Shōzō has recently suggested that significant changes in the way Uchida conceived of the early modern between his publication of the first part of *Japan's Early Modern History* in 1903 and the version of 1919 may have been a reaction to aspects in the reception of his own ideas, particularly in light of the work of other historians, notably including Fukuda. According to Sakamoto, Uchida's withdrawal from some of the universalist implications of his 1903 conception of early modernity was related to his strong rejection of Fukuda's characterization of the Tokugawa period as autocratic and his wish to instead emphasize its feudal characteristics.[58] Uchida's 1919 revision of his 1903 definition of early modernity, conducted as it was primarily through the reassertion of the primacy of feudalism (even in the early modern), could be seen as in part a reaction to the dangerous political implications that Fukuda and Naitō's foregrounding of autocracy brought to Uchida's original theory of the early modern.

For Sakamoto, in 1903 Uchida defined *kinsei* as "a modern age, meaning an historical phase in which civil society is formed by a human universalist modern rationalism supported by the rise of natural science and other factors" and thereby comparable across Japan, the West, and China; whereas in Uchida's *Kinsei no Nihon* (*Japanese Early Modernity*) of 1919 he rather emphasized the old "recent times" meaning of *kinsei*, thereby implying that Western, Chinese, and Japanese early modernities were different phenomena.[59] In doing so, he moved from a universalist to a particularist perspective. Sakamoto also links this to the reality of the quite different social and political climate of 1919, implying that the general disappointment in models of Western modernity post-WWI made it more difficult to sustain the idea of modernity as a positive universalist project than it had been in 1903.[60] I would agree with Sakamoto's

58 Sakamoto, "Edo Jidai o 'kinsei' to Iu Koto," 109–110.

59 Sakamoto, "Edo Jidai o 'kinsei' to iu koto," 110.

60 Sakamoto, "Edo Jidai o 'kinsei' to iu koto," 111–112. For a readable rendition of the sudden fall from grace of this idea, globally and in Asia, see also Pankaj Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire: The Intellectuals Who Remade Asia* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012) 184–240.

implication and much other intellectual historical writing on the period which contends that after the end of WWI, across the world, a universalist modern teleology based on a Western model was simply no longer a tenable model. As Ya-pei Kuo has elegantly argued, even in China this was the case, leading to "profound intellectual divisions" even in prominent attempts to advance modernist positions.[61]

This fall from grace of modernity itself, as a value-positive ideal, also then went on to affect the development of historiography on the early modern through the pre- and trans-WWII period. The early modern period as previously identified by the Japanese writers discussed above, both in relation to China and particularly in the case of the Japanese Tokugawa period, became a center of attention in debates over the pros and cons of modernity itself for much of the mid and late twentieth century. In Japan, the early modern period thereby became the historiographical terrain of battle over which the wars of modernity were fought.

Issues of space and the sheer volume of early modern history writing produced in the latter twentieth century preclude us from comprehensively tracing these debates, but I would generalize to identify three phases in the way academic debate engaged the terrain of the early modern period as part of the twentieth century's struggle with the ideal of modernity. Phase One, as touched on above, the post-WWI period, witnessed a general disillusionment throughout the world with the promise of a universalist modern ideal based on an airbrushed Protestant Western prototype. This disillusionment led to two main political counterreactions: 1) A communist or socialist recasting of a universalist modernity, but in reaction against many aspects of the previous model; and 2) conservative rejections of modernity which appealed back to allegedly premodern spiritual, religious, and folk traditions and their ways of social formation and human interaction. This conservative spectrum included everyone from Christian Democrats to Catholic corporatism (and various comparable Hindu, Islamic, Buddhist, and Confucian political movements) to quasi-fascism, fascism, and national socialism. Its valorization of (national) "tradition" led to a vision of the early modern which emphasized its regional or national immutability.[62] In Japan, and to a lesser extent in China, because of

61 Kuo Ya-pei, "The Making of the New Culture Movement: A Discursive History," *Twentieth Century China* 42, no. 1 (2017): 54.

62 Although Uchida was no fascist, his marching back of the universal applicability of his reading of the Japanese early modern, and his rooting it more firmly in a particularist Japanese rendering of samurai feudalism, clearly worked within this scheme, as inferred by Sakamoto.

the effectiveness of the state suppression of communism from the end of the 1920s, the second (conservative nativist) trend became dominant. The early modern period (as the immediately premodern) became a site for proving the existence of the non- or anti-modern in the relevant national culture.

Phase Two saw a reaction to these anti-modern forces, with an equally rabid pro-modernity camp arising to conscript the early modern period into its harnessing of modernity to the national narrative. For them, the early modern period once again became the site for locating modern elements as it had been back in the early 1900s for Uchida, Naitō, and friends. This camp came to dominate the post-WWII (post-fascist) period of the 1940s to 70s. In Phase Three, from the 1970s or 1980s onwards, after a half century of historical writing in which the early modern period had been the historiographical terrain for intellectual debates on modernity, historians continued those debates but with the distance to take a more balanced and nuanced approach, with modernity less likely to be seen as an either totally value-positive or value-negative idea.

Maruyama Masao's 1974 author's introduction to the English translation of his *Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan* provides an insight into the experiences of historians whose careers spanned across these different phases. First outlining his experiences in the 1930s and early 40s (the later part of Phase 1), he described a "swelling chorus of denunciation" that rose in the 1930s as part of the "overcoming modernity" movement "proclaiming that the mission of the intellectual was to hasten the demise of 'outmoded' European liberalism and to cooperate in the glorious task of constructing the New World Order."[63] But he also explains the transition out of that phase, noting how in reaction, "any intellectual or scholar who reacted strongly against these 'overcome modernity' theorists and the background currents of totalitarian ideas that sustained them was bound to feel a duty, each in his own field, to defend it. Those who went against the contemporary ideological tides, both liberals and Marxists, stood together on this intellectual battleground on the side of 'modernity.'"[64]

Notably, that intellectual battlefield was located, certainly for Maruyama, on the temporal terrain of early modernity. Maruyama himself explains his own hugely influential work of the 1940s, 1950s, and beyond (phase 2) in these terms: "Even Tokugawa ideas, if one looked at the 'deep currents,' could be seen as developing unceasingly toward modernity."[65] Maruyama was sensitive and erudite enough that by the time of his 1974 introduction, he had begun

63 Maruyama, *Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan*, xxx–xxxi.
64 Maruyama, *Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan*, xxxi.
65 Maruyama, *Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan*, xxxii.

to relativize and correct many of his phase 2 arguments, and here we can see something representative of the beginnings of what I would characterize as phase 3.

Maruyama's most famous student, today a leading figure in the history of Japanese political theory, Watanabe Hiroshi (1946–), personifies the third phase of historical writing, where early modernity remains a terrain for discussing the ideal of the modern, but with less of the factional polemics of the pre- and post-WWII period. Watanabe routinely employs the term and concept of early modernity, as do most other Japanese intellectual historians, for instance Kurozumi Makoto (1950–), and as do the major political and social historians of the Tokugawa and Meiji periods in Japan, for instance Mitani Hiroshi (1950–). Kurozumi is a good example of a scholar who routinely employs the concept of early modernity, but in a value-neutral or often value-negative manner, and sometimes as a field in which conflict between a value-negative modernity and a more positive past can be navigated.[66] This resonates with some contemporaneous scholarship on early modern India, which uses the early modern to contrast a comparatively positive vision of a multi-cultural, diverse, and open Mughal polity with a relatively negative vision of modern colonial and post-colonial India.[67] In both cases, early modern history is used as a political critique of the reality of modernity.

5 Conclusion: the Early Modern Period and Modernity

Early modern periodization can be seen as a resource that challenges simplistic conceptions of modernity. We see this challenge in the writing of Japanese

66 See, for instance, Watanabe Hiroshi, *Kinsei Nihon shakai to Sōgaku*. (Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppankai, 1985); Mitani Hiroshi, *Higashi Ajia no kōron keisei*. (Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppankai, 2004); Kurozumi Makoto, *Kinsei Nihon shakai to jukyō* (Perikansha, 2003); Kurozumi Makoto, *Fukusūsei no Nihon shisō*, (Perikansha, 2006). As noted, these are just a handful of examples from literally hundreds of Japanese history writers active in this period, most of whom interacted with the value issues inherent in modernity as they wrote early modern history. Also, due to issues of space and focus, I have precluded any discussion of the English language writing which occurred in this period on early modern Japan. I should point out, however, that in English writing the early modern also functioned as a battleground for discussing the pros and cons of modernity. An illustrative example edited during the transition from phase two to phase three is: John Whitney Hall and James L. McClain, eds., *The Cambridge History of Japan*, vol. 4, *Early Modern Japan* (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

67 For example, Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Writing the Mughal World: Studies on Culture and Politics,* (Columbia University Press, 2011).

early modern history of the last couple of decades, which by unabashedly using and critically engaging the concept of early modernity yields a more nuanced reading of the history it analyses.[68] It is also attested to by the relatively central role of the historiography of Japan in originating global historical theory, not just back in the early twentieth century, but also in the early twenty-first century, as the influence of Hayami's theory of "industrious revolution" demonstrates. So rather than being scared to associate early modernity too much with modernity for fear of being teleological, we should rather proudly use early modern history to challenge monist ideas of modernity.

The over century-long history of the origination of the concept of early modernity in academic history writing also attests to this proposition. Uchida Ginzō, Naitō Konan, and others challenged teleologies of physical force supremacy and military materialism that were wrapped up both in the reality of late nineteenth early twentieth-century modern empire and the historiographies of feudalism and the medieval through which their dominance was justified as naturally and historically ordained. Even at its origin, therefore, the use of the early modern period had a critical edge, but crucially, that critical edge relied on the sharpening stone of modernity.

Periodization is of course a choice made by historians, a choice which makes points. When Naitō Konan chose to call the Song Dynasty early modern, and thereby associate it (and China more generally) with modernity, he was not only making an insightful observation of particular aspects of commercial, class, political, and intellectual relations in the Song, he was also making the following points: a) That modernity could occur differently in different places; b) that modernity need not originate in the West; c) that modern development did not go hand-in-hand with military superiority; and most powerfully, d) that modernity did not necessarily lead to the present. He thereby disengaged ideas of historical development and human progress from narratives of brute domination and modern empire, and crucially also from an ineluctable relationship with the present. In a sense, his construction and use of the "early modern" de-teleologized modernity, hewing the theoretical abstract idea of modernity away from the brute modern imperial reality of the present, thereby undermining its claims to inevitability.

68 This is not only the case in Japan-based writing on Japanese early modern history, but also in recent Anglophone literature, for example the various works collected in Howell, *The New Cambridge History of Japan*, vol. 2. See also Laura Hein's preface and first pages of introduction to the *New History* in Laura Hein, ed., *The New Cambridge History of Japan*, vol. 3, *The Modern Japanese Nation and Empire, c.1868 to the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), xiii–xiv, 1–15.