

8-1-1985

The Self-Made Man in Meiji Japanese Thought: From Samurai to Salary Man, by Earl H. Kinmonth

William Dean Kinzley

University of South Carolina - Columbia, dean-kinzley@sc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/hist_facpub



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Publication Info

Published in *Journal of Asian Studies*, Volume 44, Issue 4, 1985, pages 840-841.

<http://www.aasianst.org/publications/JAS.htm>

© 1985 by Cambridge University Press

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History, Department of at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact SCHOLARC@mailbox.sc.edu.

Sanford. The absence of a bibliography suggests that Abbot Yamada was the principal, if not the sole, informant of Covell.

Weighing merits and flaws, however, I easily come out on the positive side. Particularly for the general public, this book serves more than adequately to introduce one of the most engaging, if controversial, figures in Japanese Buddhism. I hope that Covell's comprehensive but introductory book will stimulate other works on Ikkyū Sōjun to the benefit of us all.

T. JAMES KODERA
Wellesley College

The Self-Made Man in Meiji Japanese Thought: From Samurai to Salary Man. By EARL H. KINMONTH. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981. xi, 385 pp. Illustrations, Appendix, Bibliography, Index. \$28.50.

Two of the best selling books of the Meiji period were translations of Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* and Orison Swett Marden's *Pushing to the Front*, books intended as guides for those in quest of individual achievement and personal advancement. How does this fact square with the received wisdom suggesting that Japanese attitudes toward work and achievement derived from traditional values stressing harmony, group effort, and social utility? This question is the starting point of Earl H. Kinmonth's recent book on the evolution of "Samurai to Salary Man."

To discuss this evolution Kinmonth relies on a rich potpourri of sources. His most important materials include what he calls the "literature on self-advancement," inexpensive, often ephemeral, magazines aimed at youths seeking to get ahead in the race for "fame and glory." With titles like *Talent Forum*, *Struggling-Student World*, and *Success*, these publications provided aspirants a steady diet of advice, inspirational biography, and, in some cases, hard information on school admission rates, past examination questions, employment figures, and the like. Many contained letters and articles by young readers; others were devoted exclusively to such submissions. What these magazines, as well as more traditional literary and educational sources, reveal, according to Kinmonth, is that the concept of success, the goals of personal ambition, and the means by which such goals could be achieved underwent a significant transformation during the Meiji period.

The first two Meiji decades were heady times when leaps to the heights of political power and social prestige were sufficiently common to encourage optimism among the young. The "educated youth" of these years conceived of the acquisition of "wealth and honor" as a realistic, achievable goal. Personal success continued to be measured in traditional terms however. That is, success meant obtaining a government post and official rank. Thus, Kinmonth argues, early Meiji represented no sharp break from educational objectives of the Tokugawa period. Even during the 1880s, when constitutionalism dominated the thinking of "educated youth," the young were animated less by "political principles . . . than the achievement of personal aggrandizement through politics" (p. 85). Party politics had become simply another avenue for achieving government rank and position.

Kinmonth shows that from the early 1890s onward there was "a shift in the terms of trade for educated youth" (p. 212). The rapid growth of educational facilities, coupled with the relatively stable political and social order, brought about a "buyers market" for educated youth (p. 226). Advancement came to be conceived in terms of pitched battle for a limited number of opportunities. Social Darwinist imagery replaced the

unalloyed optimism of early Meiji. Advancement was still possible but would only come, when it came at all, more slowly and in a more limited fashion. It would come, moreover, not as a consequence of brilliance or achievement but as a result of patience and conformity. Thus, Kinmonth argues, “the dynamics of bureaucratic capitalism” encouraged the creation of a “personality ethic” for advancement at the expense of the “character ethic” that dominated early Meiji (p. 273). Personal relations, not objective performance, became the secret to success in a world of sharply diminished opportunities. The developing salary man culture after Meiji underwent little more than an elaboration and institutionalization of the “personality ethic” that began to emerge around the turn of the century.

In making this case Kinmonth has interesting things to say about community-centered values, the role of the family, the changing world of education, and the gradual erosion of the status of and remuneration for government employment. His careful reconsideration of familiar materials such as *Self-Help*, Fukuzawa Yukichi's *Gakumon no susume*, and the political novels of mid-Meiji is both valuable and suggestive. The argument based on these analyses is not entirely convincing, however.

It is true that the pool of educated youth grew rapidly over the Meiji period with commensurately narrowing opportunities for advancement. It is entirely plausible that new strategies for obtaining and retaining employment had to be formulated. And, it is probably valid that the importance of personal relations and social conformity grew in response to the changing realities of the job market. To argue, however, that “kow-towing” and “obsequiousness” constituted the basis of a new ethic for advancement seems an overstatement of the case. Kinmonth sees the growing “personality ethic” as an “other-directed” value system in which internalized moral values and character counted for little (pp. 273–74). In two places he refers to the use of the term *jinkaku*, which he translates as personality, as evidence of this new ethic (pp. 273–74, 310–11). Yet during the early years of the twentieth century *jinkaku* did not simply mean personality. It referred instead to respect for the sanctity of human individuality. The Taishō philosopher Abe Jirō developed the concept of *jinkakushugi* (*jinkaku*-ism) which posited that all value and worth emanated from within the individual. *Jinkaku* signified, therefore, something closer to personal worth or dignity-status. It was this kind of understanding that led labor leaders and social activists to demand recognition of the equality of each person's *jinkaku*. This suggests that the “personality ethic” that Kinmonth sees developing during the first years of the twentieth century represented a more complex change in social values than he would have us believe. The complexity of this change is signaled by Kinmonth himself when he argues that the striving for personal advancement and individual success during the Meiji period yielded an awareness of selfhood and ultimately “individualism in the fullest sense of the word” (p. 337). An important question would seem to be, how and to what extent did this individualism and awareness of self become infused in the “personality ethic?” That they were linked seems clear—usage of the term *jinkaku* indicates as much—but the question remains unanswered here.

To raise this question in no way diminishes the importance of this book. Kinmonth has made a major contribution to our understanding of the social values of Meiji Japan. He has provided a first-rate social history of education and employment and, perhaps more important, has opened new lines of inquiry and offered new approaches to the complex problems of modern Japan. His work deserves careful reading by a wide audience.

W. DEAN KINZLEY
University of California, San Diego