

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION: A MAP TO AMINO YOSHIHIKO'S HISTORICAL WORLD

Amino Yoshihiko has been one of the most distinguished and recognizable names in the study of Japanese history for nearly a quarter century. His area of expertise is medieval history, but since the late 1980s he has been expanding his work to include discussion of the entire span of time from the prehistoric to the early modern eras. What enabled him to initially make his mark and then sustain him outside his area of specialty is a trenchant critique of the prevailing wisdom and practices of the study of Japanese history in Japan. Since exploding onto the front of the academic stage in 1978 with his groundbreaking work Muen, Kugai, Raku (Disconnectedness, Public Space and Markets), Amino has produced an enormous volume of books, essays and interviews in which he has consistently attacked both the narratives and presumptions of mainstream Japanese historiography. By the mid-1990s, Amino's works and stature were so huge that bookstores frequently devoted entire shelves in their history sections to his work. Despite all of that published work and despite his profound impact on the field, however, very little of his work has been translated into English for audiences outside Japan.

The book that you now hold in your hands is a translation of a work published in two volumes in the mid-1990s in which he took his fight for a new vision of Japanese history to the lay reader, entitled Rereading Japanese History. When Amino approached me about translating his work, we both agreed that these two volumes, with their intended audience of non-specialists, was likely to be easier to translate and reach a broader audience than a highly specialized book on medieval Japan such as Muen, Kugai, Raku. Ultimately, we hoped that a translation of this book into English could serve a similar purpose to its intent in Japanese: to

introduce to a lay audience a radically new vision of how to approach the study of the past in Japan. Ideally, it would also spur its non-Japanese readers to question some of the fundamental premises of their own histories.

The original two volumes were both compilations of five lectures. Since each chapter was originally a stand-alone lecture, the present volume is probably best approached as a collection of essays instead of a continuous narrative. Nevertheless, when brought together, it was clear that each volume had an underlying theme that distinguished it from the other. The chapters that compose Book One are held together by their “maritime view” of the expanse of Japanese history. These chapters emphasize movement, the creation of transportation routes and interregional networks and non-agricultural production. The chapters that compose Book Two are held together by their concern with an historical ethnography of sacred and profane space. These chapters emphasize a reevaluation of the status and functions of people who are either marginalized or utterly effaced by mainstream historiography.¹ In both Books, Amino’s goal was to raise a number of common sense assumptions about the Japanese past, show that these were untenable in the light of actual historical evidence and then stimulate his audience not only to fundamentally rethink their assumptions about the past, but also their assumptions about what it means to be Japanese today.

If there is any serious obstacle to making this book intelligible to a non-Japanese audience that lacks basic familiarity with Japanese history, it is that most may fear that the assumptions (and their implications) that Amino attacks are largely unfamiliar and irrelevant to a Western audience. The major task of this introduction, then, is to enumerate those assumptions, make clear the kinds of

¹Book Two was, in fact, the first to be published, in 1991, while Book One came out in 1996. I reversed the order in the translation because I felt that Book One had more of the character of a survey and Book Two was more akin to a series of case studies. I anticipate that readers who are unfamiliar with Japanese history will find it easier to understand Amino’s work if they enter it through the survey portion.

conclusions they support, and indicate how Amino's criticisms of historiography may also prove very suggestive to those whose main interests are in histories other than Japan's. Fortunately, I believe the reader will find that, upon enumeration, many of those assumptions will prove to be not only *not* uniquely Japanese, but indeed familiar to many of our commonplace assumptions about the process of History itself. As I see it, Amino's criticisms are basically of two kinds: ideological and procedural. In other words, some of the assumptions Amino attacks have to do with ideas about what the past was like and how it relates to the present (the ideological assumptions) and others have to do with how one actually studies the past (the procedural assumptions). If the reader keeps these assumptions in mind, he or she will find it much easier to follow the train of Amino's narrative and feel the impact of his evidence and his conclusions.

The Agricultural Ideal

Let us begin with one of the most central: the idea that the most important and fundamental activity in Japan up until the modern period was agriculture. The idea is that Japan has always been an "agricultural society;" the vast majority of people were farmers (usually called "peasants," and usually estimated to constitute about 80% of the total population) who lived in rural communities and paid taxes to the government in the form of harvested crops. Supporting this idea are such facts as 1) the vast majority of official documents that survive from the past are concerned with land and agriculture, 2) native religious practices (Shintô) are deeply related to agricultural cycles, and 3) the premodern ruling class's valorization of agriculture as the fundamental moral activity (after governance, of course). In other words, it appears that classic historical evidence (documents) and classic anthropological evidence (studies of native beliefs) are both nearly overwhelmed with references to

agriculture. Moreover, the statements of moralists, philosophers and petitioners from the past seem to be in near universal agreement as to the ideological centrality of agriculture.

Such evidence is also reinforced by common assumptions as to what constitutes the modern condition: a radical break from the past that produced industry, commerce, urbanization, mass society and the breakdown of a consensus on morality. If the modern era is marked by the rise of industry, then the premodern era, we are inclined to believe, must have been its opposite: agricultural. If the modern era is defined by a general obsession with commerce and currency, then the premodern age must have been a time when people were largely self-sufficient and bartered for their other needs. If the modern era is the age of great cities and rural depopulation, then premodern life must have been overwhelmingly rural, with the majority of people living in small, mutually supporting (or stifling) communities. If the modern era is the time of the masses (universal education, mass communication and mass travel), then the premodern world must have been constituted by relatively isolated communities living in ignorance of the outside world and hampered by illiteracy. And if the modern present is a time of relativism and ideological diversity, then the premodern past must have been a time of philosophical absolutism and conformity. Thus, not only does the preponderance of evidence seem to show that the premodern past in Japan was agricultural, but given our common tendency to view modernity and premodernity as opposites, we are inclined to find in the premodern past evidence of the opposite of our present lives.

These assumptions about the difference between the modern present and the premodern past are largely legacies of nineteenth century European thinking about what made “the West” great, powerful and justified in colonial conquest. These oppositions were seen as reflecting real differences between the “industrial” West

and the “agricultural” East. Married to ideas about the evolution of human societies, the difference could also be phrased as a difference between the “progressive” West and the “stagnant” East. The “humanitarian” project of the colonial powers was to free its colonial subjects from the bonds of premodern stagnation and stifling conformity and raise them on the evolutionary scale to an industrial present. Lest we see this as just a nineteenth century conceit, a simple scan of any daily newspaper, popular magazine or television news show in the United States will quickly reveal that this basic view of the world is alive and well today.

But how did Amino’s Japanese readers, people who would have been classed as members of the “stagnant” East, have come to embrace these Euro-American conceits? The answer is, of course, in the ways that Japanese made sense of their country’s success as the only non-Western nation to successfully industrialize/modernize in the first half of the twentieth century. There are many elements to this story. We might first note that with the creation of Western-style universities in the late nineteenth century, the disciplines and methodologies embraced by these institutions were explicitly Western. Studying a discipline such as History meant studying the great texts of Western historiography and historical theory and learning to apply their insights to the study of Japan. From the beginning, therefore, the study of History in modern Japan has been guided by the basic assumptions of modern European historiography that were generated during the age of high imperialism.

Next, we might note that there was a strong inclination on the part of the modern Japanese state, brought into being after the Meiji Restoration toppled the Tokugawa shogunate in 1868, to strongly differentiate itself from the regime that preceded it. As the modern Japanese state mobilized the people and strove to

inculcate them with a sense of Japan's modern destiny, the basic Western historiographical notions about premodern societies, applied to Japan's recent past and the soon-to-be-colonized Asian present, became a way to measure the fantastic progress of modern Japan. An emphasis on Japan's overwhelming agricultural past could serve to accentuate just how far Japan had come in how little time and thus give modern Japanese a sense of national pride in their accomplishments. At the same time as the modern present could be valorized at the expense of the premodern past, there were many who switched the poles and castigated the present with a vision of a healthy past. Here, too, the standard ideas of Western historiography about the agricultural character of premodern life prevailed. In this view, the modern present produced industry, mammoth cities, war and destruction and, ultimately, alienation from one's true cultural identity. For such critics of Japanese modernity, the notion of a premodern agricultural past offered a vision of community, self-sufficiency and a true cultural identity.

In sum, Amino's Japanese audience is strongly inclined to believe that the modern present and the premodern past are nearly opposites and, moreover, that the modern present is industrial while the premodern past was agricultural. Most non-Japanese readers will probably also find this view to be deeply ingrained in themselves. If we recognize the power of this idea, we are likely to find it stunning that Amino takes this on as one of the main ideas that must be debunked. How does he do that? Without giving it away (I'll let Amino do that himself), I want to foreshadow his methods. Amino cannot do this through a simple-minded numbers game. He cannot say: agriculture was an unimportant activity and peasants were actually a minority. What he does instead is draw our attention to the ways that our assumptions of an agricultural past blind us to the complexities and diversity of that past. He does not tell us that people in rural communities did not grow crops, but

he forcefully argues that agriculture was not the only dimension of their lives. The problem is one of the degree to which we are captured by the terms we use. Amino points out how hard it is for most of us to picture someone we have been calling a “peasant” because of the farmland he owns turning out to be also engaged in maritime commerce, or proto-industrial production, or financial activities. Large-scale statistics may lead us to believe that most of the people were engaged in agriculture most of the time, but when we let that statistical generalization force from sight all activity not subsumed in that category, then we have lost sight of a real, and important, set of activities from the past. In other words, the agricultural assumption leads to a sterile, homogenized view of the past, with all non-agricultural activity being marked as “exceptional” and “not normal.” This is why, as the reader will discover, Amino repeatedly stresses that not all villagers were farmers.

Amino also undermines the agricultural ideal by honing in on its presumptions of self-sufficiency and immobility, as represented by the ideal of the rural community. The idea of an unadulterated rural community has had a central place in most modern national imaginings, as it has in Japan. The notion supports two powerful desires: that there be communities in which people create and sustain long-term interpersonal relationships and that, in being self-sufficient, they are free from outside contamination. The outlines of this myth of rural communities becomes quite clear when we recognize that it is a myth that is constructed as an explicit opposition to images of the city. Cities are seen as diametrically opposed to rural communities because they are places where people are alienated from each other and there is constant influx of people and goods from the outside (making them places of “contamination”). Therefore, nationalist ideologues almost always place ideals of pure, self-sufficient rural communities at the heart of their imagery.

Amino destroys this illusion by completely undermining this notion of a pure, self-sufficient community. Such a community, he insists, has never existed. Even the prehistoric Jōmon-era inhabitants of the islands (he tells us in his maritime survey of Japanese history) engaged in constant, wide-ranging trade that both covered the archipelago (see his discussion of obsidian production) and spanned the East Asian oceans. Thus the reader of this book will find that Amino's attention is consistently drawn to movement—networks, routes, circulations—and exchange—of goods, peoples and cultures. In that regard, he draws a distinction between administrative labels and popular presumptions, on the one hand, and actual practices on the other (See “Cities Designated as Villages” in “Was Japanese Society Agricultural?”). Early modern government labels that designated all settlements without samurai living in them “villages” had more to do with the attempt to realize an ideological system than with a reflection of actual practices. These labels are compounded by contemporary popular assumptions about what constitutes “backwater” places. For Amino, the terms rural and urban have little to do with scale and everything to do with the character of daily life. An urban settlement is inescapably part of a circulation network. It is a place where exchange is a fundamental activity, where production is premised upon consumption elsewhere and where equivalences between things are determined. As Amino characterizes as “urban” town after town that most Japanese would think of as hopelessly isolated and minuscule. He highlights the vast networks and constant mobility that he believes animated the Japanese past. With the proliferation of urban nodes in a network covering the islands, even the images of rural communities where agriculture was dominant are unsustainable, for the “city” is no longer so far away.

The Mainstream and the Margin

Amino's work has long been focused on those people and classes that have generally been disregarded in the mainstream histories. These include itinerant merchants, miners, gamblers, pirates, wandering entertainers, slaves and servants, prostitutes, and outcasts. From the perspective of mainstream political histories, these were not the people who moved and made the major political trends of Japanese history. They were, instead, the nameless many who were the object of governance. For others, particularly those on the left who are concerned with class struggle in Japanese history, these people are easily lumped into the category of the oppressed, or else dismissed as residing outside the bounds of the major class conflicts between the ruling warriors and the subjected peasants. Many have dismissed Amino as excessively concerned with marginal peoples and experiences. They are willing to grant him some degree of accuracy in his depiction of marginal types, and even allow that those voices might also be legitimately recovered. But they accuse him of exaggeration in his insistence on their importance to Japanese history.

However much Amino argues that their experiences are effaced and forgotten by an overemphasis on the majority, his goal is not to simply recover their voices so that they, too, might be heard. His argument is much more ambitious. In placing these "marginal" types at the center of his views of Japanese history, Amino wishes to show us the way that the so-called mainstream is constantly engaged in a struggle with that which it would place on the margins. It is the struggle that places some at the center and some at the margins, and both are equally constituted as such by that struggle.

In this sense, Amino argues, we simply cannot understand the mainstream by the stories it tells of itself, stories in which the marginal are deemed so unimportant

as to be invisible. Instead, he urges us to recognize that the story of how the marginal came to be marginalized is absolutely central to the story of how the center became the center. For Amino, the normal/the center/the mainstream is not naturally so. It was historically constituted as such out of political and social struggle. As we live today in the society that resulted from the victory of the “now-center,” the history of the marginalized, made to confront its opponent once again, offers us a rare opportunity to critically reevaluate what we have become. Amino tells this story in a variety of terms, such as in a struggle between an “agricultural fundamentalist” ideology and a “mercantilist/commercial” ideology, with the latter being the world view of those who would be marginalized. But while we might find heroic resistance in the stories of the despised outcast, Amino refuses to romanticize. At one point he strikingly indicates that there were serious “despotic” tendencies in the losing side as well.

At a more general level than the battle between the proponents of agriculture and the proponents of commerce, Amino urges us to pay attention to what he calls “the world of relations” (*yûen*) and “the world of non-relations” (*muen*). Here again, he urges us to recognize that the marginalized people of the “non-related world” were not just passive victims who were excluded by the mainstream. Instead, he insists that they actively rejected the mainstream. A word is surely in order here about this key concept in Amino’s work.

When explaining this concept to non-specialists, Amino refers first to a phenomenon of the early modern period: the “relation-severing temple” (*enkiridera*). These were Buddhist temples to which those seeking to sever a defining relationship in their lives could flee for asylum. Women who wanted to divorce their husbands (a right they did not formally have in the legal system) could flee to a “relation-severing temple” and thereby force their husbands to divorce them. Servants who

wanted to break a relation of servitude with their masters could do so as well. In many cases, these places functioned very much like Catholic churches in Europe: criminals who managed to escape to churches could claim asylum. The principle, in both Japan and Europe, was that these were places into which secular power could not and did not extend. They were places through which one cut off one's mainstream relations in the world. When one entered these spaces, one was now seen as "un-related". One was now no longer defined by standard social relations.

Amino argues that these were not simply safety valves, but emblematic of the social organization of space. In his view, we need to understand societies in which such spaces existed as composed of a patchwork of spaces and peoples, some of which were fully beholden to society and some of which were "free" from social constraints. Recasting such places as "free" spaces, Amino asks us to reexamine the activities that were linked to such spaces and to rethink the meaning of freedom.

There is, for many, a stunning reversal at work here, for the people populating these "free" spaces were precisely the people who could be labelled "outcast" by the mainstream and who often called themselves "slaves of the gods." Ironically, the spaces of freedom are the spaces through which the socially subordinated (such as women, servants, slaves) and the socially despised (outcasts, wandering entertainers, prostitutes) moved and lived. In the end, we are left with a dilemma that cannot be resolved in our contemporary imaginative framework. For the people of the "free" places were both free and subordinate while the people of the mainstream were both bound and superior. Put in such terms, these remain social phenomena that we simply cannot understand. Amino's provocative juxtapositions of freedom and servitude in relation to differentiated social functions ultimately calls on us to reject such binary notions and radically re-imagine that past.

Continuity and Japanese-ness

Amino received his pre-secondary education prior to 1945 in the years when Japanese were taught (at the insistence of the Ministry of Education) that Japan had existed since time immemorial as a unified and homogeneous nation, under an unbroken line of divine emperors, distinct from all other peoples. Since the war, the worst excesses of this historical world view—such as the insistence on the divinity of the emperors—have been removed from the curriculum. But there are still strong tendencies to view Japan as having been culturally and racially homogeneous for thousands of years, and to see the distant past of archaic Japan as being smoothly continuous with the present. Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro infamously articulated this vision of Japan when he argued that the root of American economic woes lay in the nation's racial diversity. Conversely, for Nakasone, and many other cultural conservatives, the key to understanding Japanese success in the 1980s was that it has somehow always remained essentially Japanese, unchanged since the dawn of time. The guarantee and proof of that durable national character, for these people, is in the “unbroken line of emperors.”

Amino's work throws buckets of cold water on this notion. Beginning with the name “Nihon” (the Japanese word for Japan), Amino insists on its historicity. That is, he insists that the word has not meant the same thing—either conceptually or geographically—at all times. While the name may have been coined in the sixth or seventh century, Japan, as we think of it today, did not come into being until the nineteenth century. To demonstrate the difference, he painstakingly shows us how the borders have shifted over time and how the idea of Japan as a kind of social-political unit also changed dramatically. One of my favorite moments is when Amino inverts the famous legends of the origins of the name Nihon. Since he does

not spell it out, since he assumes the familiarity of his audience, I will do so here.

The name “Nihon” literally means the origin of the sun. Popular lore in Japan portrays this name as the invention of a proud people one-upping the Chinese empire: China may be the central kingdom, but we are the source of the sun! Chinese and Korean scholars, particularly since World War II, have been known to claim that the name was invented in their countries as a gesture of respect that was to be betrayed in subsequent histories of Japanese violence against them. Amino’s view leans closer to those of the Chinese and Korean scholars, but he focuses on its meaning within the islands. Rather than see “the origin of the sun” as a name of overweening pride, Amino sees it as the moment when a ruling class in the Japanese islands forthrightly recognized the centrality of China in all things. For Amino, “the origin of the sun” is not a claim to priority, it is simply a term of direction: Japan is to the east (where the sun rises) of China (the point of reference for all things). There are important, sometimes subtle, differences between Amino’s story and those told popularly in Japan, China and Korea. His is the opposite of those in Japan who see “the origin of the sun” as a proud rejection of China’s claim to centrality and superiority. Unlike the Chinese and Korean stories, which give agency in the act of naming to the “superior and civilized continentals,” Amino sees the origin of the name in the islands as a sign that it was the people of the islands who willingly recognized that superiority themselves; it was not foisted upon them by haughty, self-important people.

Amino’s vision of Japan’s geo-political past is one that sees constant fracturing, realignment, conquest and fragmentation yet again. The only way to accurately convey this geographical instability is to buck convention and give up on using the name Japan when talking about the past. As long as people in the present think of Japan as naturally conforming to the present borders with its current

number of islands, using the name Japan will simply invite readers to confusion. The careful reader of this translation will notice that I have been at pains to consistently retain Amino's avoidance of the word "Japan," especially when Amino is discussing the time before the name "Nihon" was even invented (at which times he resolutely refers to the place as "the islands", rather than Japan).

Some readers will note that while Amino sometimes refers to time in consistently broad strokes (often in terms of two hundred year spans), he is always agonizingly specific as to place. At its broadest, Amino's Japan is always at least culturally split between an Eastern Japan and a Western Japan.² At his more specific moments, location, whether in mountains, on coasts, on plains, near major continental travel routes, along rivers and so on is absolutely crucial. At points, his lists of place names get so detailed that I felt compelled to cut them down in size so as to not spin the heads of those who are not Japan specialists for whom the internal geography of the islands may, at best, be a blur.

Perhaps one of the most significant ways that Amino upsets our commonsense notions of what Japan is geographically is by adopting "the perspective of the sea," as he calls it. For too long, he argues, we have seen Japan from a land-based perspective, one that sees it as naturally isolated—as islands often are— from the rest of the world. From the land-based perspective, the islands naturally cohere to themselves, apart from the Asian mainland and the rest of the world. Of course the history of Japan would be contained strictly within these bounds, we are told. Japanese were cut off by the ocean from the rest of the world, and that isolation enabled Japanese to create a unique culture. In contrast, Amino argues that the ocean can also be a conduit that links people. In general, water-

²Most non-Japanese might be inclined to call it a northern and southern Japan, with the dividing line residing somewhere around Nagoya or Kyoto. But the Japanese convention is to call this a divide between the East (what we see as north) and a West (south).

based travel was always easier and more fully developed in the islands than was land-based travel. People traveled along rivers, across lakes, along the coast and across the ocean to the Asian mainland. In fact, Amino argues that there is no real reason to believe that the ancient “kingdom” of Wa, known to most as the name of Japan before “Nihon” was invented, was restricted simply to the islands. In a stunning geographical re-read, Amino argues that Wa was more likely an ocean centered polity, with settlements in the Japanese islands, the Korean peninsula and the Chinese coast all linked politically, commercially and culturally to each other by the ocean. With that claim, Amino sweeps aside decades of stale debate about the location in the Japanese islands of the “kingdom of Wa” that exchanged emissaries with the ancient Chinese emperors. For Amino, the key to understanding Wa is not to know where it was centered, but the spaces across which it spread. With this change in perspective, Amino beckons us to a fluid vision of constant movement of people and goods across the oceans, between the islands and along rivers. He urges us to replace a static vision with a mobile one.

All in all, Amino forcefully argues that the belief that, except for brief periods of exchange, the people of the Japanese islands have always been isolated from the rest of the world must finally be put to rest. He argues that we must instead recognize that the Japanese islands have always been linked with multiple sites on the Asian continent, sites not restricted to China and Korea, but also far to the south and north. For Amino, there is simply no way to understand society in the Japanese islands without recognizing its deep connections with Asia. He has a favorite illustration of this idea that has everything to do with how we draw our maps. The usual maps of Japan are cut so as to show Japan surrounded simply by water. To highlight their limitations, Amino likes to show his audiences a map of Japan turned one-quarter turn clockwise so that west is at the top. The northern boundary of his

map lies far north of Hokkaido; it lies far enough north to include all of Sakhalin. Likewise, the southern border of the map is located south of Taiwan. In the very center of this map lies not the islands, but the Japan sea, broad in its middle, but remarkably narrow at the northern tip of Sakhalin and the southern tip of Korea. Whenever Amino displays this map, he urges his audience to re-envision the relationship between land and water and to see the Japan sea not as a vast, dividing body of water, but as a kind of inland sea, like Lake Superior. For those who recast their vision, the ocean loses its obstacle quality while the close land links also come to the fore.

But a recasting of the geography is not the only way Amino disrupts the common notion of the unity, continuity and homogeneity of Japan. He also pays close attention to real political divisions. For Amino, the continuity of the imperial throne was not meaningless—indeed, it was more meaningful in some ways than otherwise imagined—but this continuity should never be mistaken for actual political unity. Instead, he is fond of pointing to moments when political units formed that rejected the practical authority of the imperial government in Kyôto. While some of these were short lived—such as the rival kingdoms formed in the tenth century by rebellions to the east and west of Kyôto—others were quite durable, notably the Kamakura shogunate. To emphasize the differentiation of the Kamakura shogunate from the imperial government in Kyôto, Amino chooses the provocative terms: “the monarchy of the west” (meaning the imperial government in Kyoto) and “the monarchy of the east” (referring to the Kamakura shogunate). While specialist scholars may be accustomed to such a debate, this is very shocking language to a lay audience in Japan.

Amino has one further bucket of cold water for those who believe that Japanese culture is continuous from ancient times: his argument that there are

fundamental, radical breaks in sociocultural history. Amino refers to these major transitions as periods when the relationship of humans to nature undergoes a radical change. This is a gritty, material way of designating a radical change in world view. According to Amino, at certain periods of time, prevailing world views become unsustainable and undergo a radical transformation. There are many reasons why a world view becomes unsustainable, some of which refer to gradual changes in culture and society that eventually place earlier ways of understanding in jeopardy, others of which refer to such far reaching changes in the human interaction with, and change of, the landscape that human beings literally cannot interact with nature in the same ways as before. Whatever the case, these major transformations may not happen overnight (he tends to see them occurring over a period of a century or two). But once the change has happened, earlier ways of viewing and living in the world become almost unimaginable because they are so divorced from current physical and social experience.

In his grand scheme of things, he locates such a fundamental transformation in the fourteenth century in the Japanese islands. As he sees it, people on either side of the transformation are almost unintelligible to each other. As Amino states in his foreword, the world we live in now was begun in the fourteenth century. The time before that was not irrelevant, but it cannot be understood by the conceptual framework that had its beginning after the divide. To put it as radically as possible, modern Japanese are far more conceptually and culturally attuned to modern Americans than they are to their pre-fourteenth-century ancestors. The notion that there is a single, unified Japanese culture that continues unmolested and fully recognizable across that divide is simply a fantasy. Moreover, to heighten our sense of what that transformation means, he suggests that we may be in the middle of another such long-term transformation at present. One or two hundred years hence,

he speculates, our descendents may live such utterly different lives, physically and imaginatively, that we may be almost inconceivable to them. If they lack historians who are sensitive to the enormity of historical change, we would barely recognize their stories about us.

Documents and History

History is often seen as having a great deal in common with judicial law. Both are concerned with establishing an objective account of an event (in their search for the “truth”) and both have rules of evidence that tend to privilege documents. Personal testimony, particularly of eyewitnesses, may have a place in both. But ultimately, testimony retains too much potential subjectivity, that is the possibly idiosyncratic perspective of the individual. Documents, however, are taken to be a kind of material and public witness, and therefore far more reliable. Of course, few historians or judges would view all documents as inherently truthful, but the reliance on documents is, nevertheless, very strong.

One of Amino’s most important and fruitful methodological attacks on mainstream history in Japan is that it is far too uncritically reliant on documents for its narratives. Amino’s rereading of Japanese history, in contrast, is based upon his materialist approach to documents and on his generous embrace of the non-documentary evidence of the past provided by ethnography. By a “materialist approach” I mean that Amino reads documents not just for their content, but for evidence of how they were produced, circulated and retained (or discarded). For example, in “On Writing” Amino reminds his readers that Japan has three orthographic systems (hiragana, katakana and kanji) and that these systems are not simply transparent renderings of meaning. Instead, the orthography is itself a code that produces another set of meanings that accompany the semantic meaning of the

words. Take, for instance, the 1275 *katakana* petition of the villagers of Kami village. The *katakana* is not a sign of the villagers' lack of sophistication, as Amino says he and most people once believed. Instead, when one understands the representative function of *katakana*, one sees that by writing the petition entirely in *katakana* the villagers may well have been signalling to their anticipated reader the immediacy of their testimony (*katakana* being used to transcribe testimony) as well as the utter truthfulness of their statement (*katakana* being related to speech, particularly of the deities). Likewise, the skill with which a letter is written in *hiragana* signals to its reader the literary accomplishments of the writer. Beyond orthography, Amino reminds us to pay attention to format as he notes the dizzying range of writing styles that existed in premodern Japan.

In even more materialist terms, Amino asks us to consider the physical existence of a document. In his discussion of his investigation of the Tokikuni family documents, he highlights for us the distinction between documents that survived to the present because they were meant to be saved (because they had been produced for and exchanged with the domainal lord) and documents that survived “accidentally” (because they were meant to be destroyed or recycled to other uses). Not surprisingly, Amino finds two very different worlds represented in these two sets of documents. Also not surprising, he finds that mainstream historiography relies almost exclusively on those documents that were meant to survive, and either ignores or discounts as aberrational the “accidental” survivals. But, as he is quick to point out, mainstream history narrative is unsustainable if one takes the “accidents” seriously.

The most serious problem with the accidentally surviving documents is that they are, at best, mere traces of a world that has vanished. Either that disposal was conscious (an attempt to hide something) or incidental (for want of discernible value

in keeping it). Recovery of the consciously hidden is the dream of every historian, and so familiar territory. But the other kind of lost evidence relates to something far more mundane and yet difficult: everyday life. Many of the documents that were found stuffed into walls that Amino discusses in “Was Japanese Society Agricultural?” were of the most commonplace class: lists, receipts, mundane notes and such. Much like our grocery lists, laundry receipts and what not, these were items of no enduring value whatsoever to the people who produced them. After serving their original purpose, they would now be best use as insulation. But like the innumerable scraps of paper we throw away today, these were the items that filled and constituted daily life, the common ground and common sense that formed the context for the remarkable “events” that historians deal with. Although historians value “contextualization,” the idea that History is the tale of “great men and great events” still holds true for many. The history of everyday life is a field that is still in its infancy.

Amino’s concern with daily life has led him to a fruitful engagement with ethnography, a field that has specialized in the analysis of everyday life. The clearest example of Amino’s use of ethnographic evidence is in his use of notions of the sacred and the profane in relation to class and commerce. Amino’s rereading of the concept of pollution, a central concept of religious belief in the islands, is at the core of most of Book II. It is ethnographic evidence that compels him to rethink the status of archaic and medieval groups known as “non-humans” and “divine slaves.” It also allows him to show us how what is now loathed was, in fact, once feared for its superior power. It is ethnographic evidence related to sacred space that allows him to link marketplaces, monks and women and thereby reveal hitherto hidden circuits of exchange and production. When Amino speaks about changes in “civilizational” or “ethnic” history, it is to these dimensions of society and culture

that he refers.

The Author

The experience of World War II, and especially pre-war and wartime education in Japan is fundamental to Amino's development as a historian, as it was for so many other postwar historians. Amino, born in 1928, was seventeen and on the verge of being drafted when the war ended. As he described in a recent memoir, in the months after defeat he immersed himself in books on history and historiography in order to be able to confront the momentous changes of an uncertain future. As with so many, this study of history was critical, one that was at least subconsciously driven by the question "why did we lose?". The question could be posed in terms of defeat caused by incomplete modernization (the "Japan was still feudal" argument), or it could be posed in terms of a corrective to prewar Japanese ideology ("the lies my teacher told me"). Whatever the intent of the study, immediate postwar Japan was a time when the study of history was understood to have tremendous import for contemporary political practice. If, as many argued, Japanese modernity was tainted by the perdurance of premodern "feudal" characteristics that then gave rise to self-destructive militarism, then a study of Japanese "feudalism" would enlighten postwar seekers of true, modern democracy. If prewar Japanese had been brainwashed by an educational system that infused them with self-destructive myths of emperor-centered history and divine nationhood, then a free postwar Japan would need a people-centered, humanist history.

Amino's recollection of this time in his life is encapsulated in the title of the introduction to his memoirs of postwar historiography, "My Postwar 'War Crimes.'" He recalls this as a time when, despite the belief that history would reveal

a new politics, it was political passions that ruthlessly drove historical research. While in college, Amino became a leading member of the leftist student movement. With the responsibility of a leader and in the midst of the political ferment, Amino spent more time in meetings, giving speeches and organizing on other campuses than he remembers spending in the classroom or library. Amino insists he has no regrets about having fought for “people’s history” at the time. “However,” he writes, “without ever having put myself into any physical danger, I merely went from meeting to meeting giving lip service to ‘revolutionary’ things and writing stupid and embarrassing essays about ‘feudal revolution’ and ‘the concept of feudalism.’ For the sake of my ‘good name,’ I drove others to sickness and death. I was nothing other than a ‘war criminal.’”³ Whether he was really responsible for others’ lost lives, I believe his self-accusation is primarily a charge against his having subordinated historical research to political ideology, precisely what the prewar Japanese state did in its militarist indoctrination.

After graduation, Amino got a job at a research center called the Institute for the Study of Japanese Folk Culture, but continued to be more involved in the student movement and national historical association debates than in his new job.⁴ For reasons he does not make entirely clear, Amino claims that problems he was having at the Institute finally woke him up to the shallowness of his historical study. With that he dropped out of the student movement and the historical association debates and rededicated himself to a “document by document” study of history. It

³Amino Yoshihiko, *Rekishi to shitenno sengo shigaku*, Nihon editaa sukuuru shuppanbu, 2000, p. 4.

⁴The Institute founded in the early 1930s by Shibusawa Keizō, grandson of the Meiji industrialist Shibusawa Eiichi and the Minister of Finance in the first post-surrender Japanese cabinet. The prewar Institute, known until 1942 as the Attic Museum, had been one of the key organizations in the native ethnology movement, a movement that rejected “great men, great events” versions of History-writing in favor of ethnographic histories of the “common folk.” In the postwar years, the Institute was attached to the Fisheries Agency, due mostly to the interest in fishing history of Shibusawa and several of its key members. While Amino speaks of “problems” while at the Institute, it is clear that he now treasures his time there and looks to its members, particularly Shibusawa Keizō, as exemplary historians.

is likely that the force of his rejection of his pre-1953 self is behind the fact that he is particularly harsh in his critique of mainstream Marxist historiography in Japan. While Americans embraced the labelling of Japan as “feudal” during and immediately after the war, it was a term that was at the heart of Marxist historiography in Japan. And in the postwar struggle to overturn prewar historical narratives, it was Marxist historians who led the way. But as the struggles over a new historiography continued, greater attention was paid to fitting Japan within the preexisting categories of Marxist historiography than was paid to basic research. In other words, the framework superseded the history, reducing the past to a supporting role as mere evidence. Given Amino’s attacks on historical categories and ideology, it was this aspect of Marxist historiography that continues to bother him the most. Yet when asked in a 1997 interview if he was no longer a Marxist, Amino adamantly rejected the suggestion.

I don’t think of myself as distanced from Marxism at all. When I came to the conclusion in 1953 that everything I had done was wrong, I struggled to return to the basics. I read all I could of medieval and early modern documents and of the best of modern histories, books by people like the legal historian Nakada Kaoru. I also reread the entire selected works of Marx and Engels. As I did so, I came to see a Marx who was entirely different from the one I thought I had known. You know, Marx himself gradually changed his way of thinking. For example, when you read his *Eighteenth Brumaire*, you find that he was also a superlative critic of the “present” [in addition to his historical talent]. I believe I still have much to learn from Marx, so I still call myself a Marxist.

Three years after his change of heart, the Institute folded and he spent a year, newly married, taking odd jobs until he finally landed a position teaching Japanese history at a high school in Tokyo. Thus began the second phase of his disenchantment with the mainstream narratives of Japanese history. It was not the grind of teaching unimaginative and unmotivated students that we now commonly imagine high school teaching to be. In fact, Japanese high schools in the late 1950s

and early 1960s gave their teachers time off for research.⁵ But in several essays and interviews, he has credited his students with asking questions that shook him out of a complacent reiteration of the standard narratives. To take one example that is closely related to the content of this book: while lecturing on the rise of the new Kamakura-era Buddhist sects, a student asked him why so many great religious leaders appeared in the thirteenth century. “Because it was a time of transformation,” he replied, repeating the pat explanation. Unsatisfied, the student kept on, “But there were lots of other times of transformation [that did not produce great religious leaders], so why the thirteenth century?”⁶ With questions such as these, his high school students left him with itches that he scratched for the next thirty years.

In the late 1960s, Amino moved from teaching high school to university (at Nagoya University). His work on *shōen* estates from 1966 to the late 70s was idiosyncratic, but did not necessarily receive much notoriety. In 1978, however, he published the book that would make him famous and touch off a minor industry in historical studies: Muen, Kugai, Raku: Nihon chūsei no jiyū to heiwa (Disconnectedness, Public Space and Markets: Freedom and Peace in Medieval Japan). Amino’s radical break from the prevailing historiography of medieval Japan was apparent in two words from the title: “disconnectedness” and “freedom.” Against the standard characterization of medieval Japan as an “agricultural slave society,” Amino argued that medieval society had a variety of “unconnected spaces” (*muen no ba*) that allowed for considerable free agency on the part of those whom the mainstream historians lumped together as “the oppressed.” Most surprising of all, the book argues persuasively that these places and the activities that took place

⁵Amino published one book, a study of Taranoshō estate from his research while teaching high school. Amino Yoshihiko, Chūsei shōen no yōsō, 1966.

⁶Amino Yoshihiko, “Watakushi no ikikata,” Rekishi to shitenno sengo shigaku, p. 291.

therein were not exceptions to the rule, but were constitutive of the very fabric of economic life. Amino's argument was discomfiting to historians on both the left and the right. To leftist historians, his depiction of the freedom and agency of the "oppressed" seemed to deny their oppression and undermine the progressive narrative of history as a movement from slavery to freedom. Many accused him of having an altogether too rosy vision of medieval society. To right wing historians, Amino had shunted aside the beloved rural community as the central stage of Japanese history and he had the audacity to claim that outcasts and degenerates were the closest associates of the emperor. There was little room in his history for the heroic tales of loyal, self-sacrificing warriors and cultured, aloof courtiers.

I remember clearly my own amazement at first reading the book. When I first met Amino in 1989 in a seminar at the University of Chicago, I went to ask him one afternoon to clear up some confusion I was having about who it was that these "unconnected places" were for. My confusion turned to shock as it became clear that he saw these as places not just for outcasts and wanderers. "This isn't just the history of a marginal few," I said incredulously. "You're telling me this is a history of the majority!" He just smiled and nodded.

In the years since the publication of Muen, Kugai, Raku, Amino has become one of the most prolific, most sought-after historians in Japan. He has also encouraged and trained a host of other historians who are pushing his insights even farther. But while his "line" is becoming more familiar to most readers of Japanese history, it still resides on the margin. I saw a perfect example of his continued marginalization in 1992. Kawai Juku, the national chain of college preparatory schools, approached Amino about producing a series of videotapes on Japanese history for their students. Always eager for an opportunity to take his historical vision to non-specialists, Amino quickly agreed. The tape, Japanese History as

Viewed from the Sea, was a fascinating presentation of Amino's recent work. But Kawai Juku never showed it to their students. Why? Amino's critique of mainstream historiography was so trenchant and his rejection so thorough that Kawai Juku feared it would prove counterproductive to their students' scores on the history portion of their college entrance exams. Therein lies the greatest obstacle to Amino successfully overthrowing the historical myths of the mainstream. So long as those myths remain on the college entrance exams (and the textbooks on which they are based), teachers will have no choice but to teach them and students will have no choice but to memorize them.