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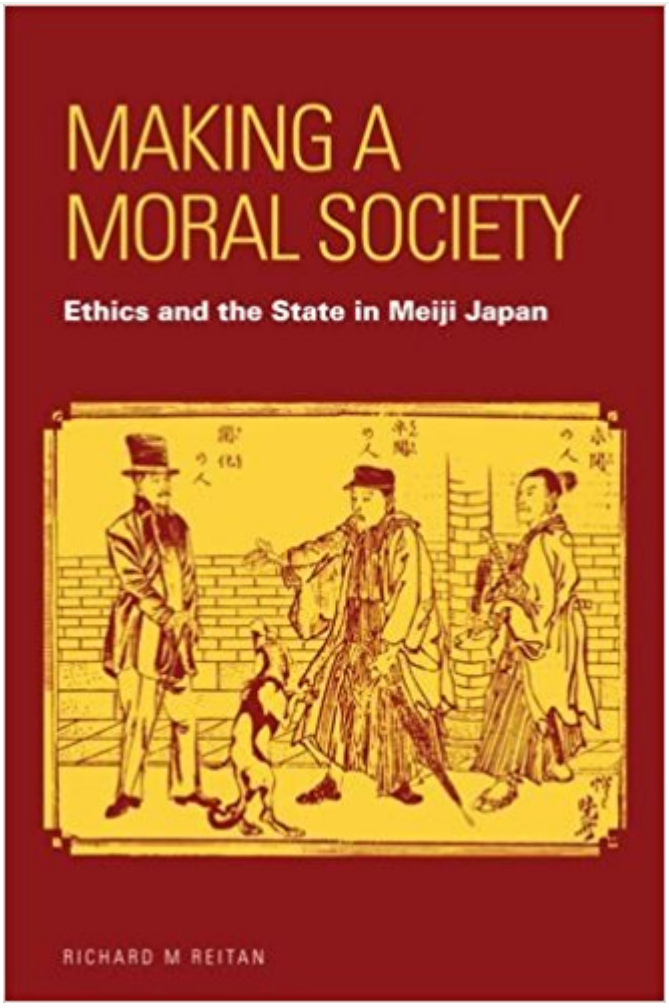
Making a Moral Society: Ethics and the State in Meiji Japan



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Reviewed Work(s)

Making a Moral Society: Ethics and the State in Meiji Japan. By Richard M. Reitan (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010). Pp. 229. Cloth, $48.00.

The tumultuous events of the Pacific War have long been a central interest to scholars of modern Japanese history. For intellectual historians, this period has been the subject of intense study as they have attempted to grasp the historical conditions that led to the emergence of fascism and ultimately, total war in Japan. Given that philosophy, as practiced in the West, is usually seen as having emerged in Japan only at the beginning of the twentieth century with the publication of Nishida Kitarō's *Zen no kenkyū* (1911), the intellectual history of the early Meiji period has been somewhat overshadowed by the study of the late Meiji and early twentieth-century intellectual discourse (the Meiji period ran from 1868-1912).[1] Thus, Richard M. Reitan's book *Making a Moral Society: Ethics and the State in Meiji Japan*, contributes greatly to the field as it increases our understanding of the Meiji intellectual discourse, while also serving as a useful prehistory to the well-studied interwar and wartime periods. Reitan skilfully engages the subject of *rinrigaku* (the academic discipline of ethics in Japan) by focusing on the transforming conditions of possibility for morality in Meiji Japan. As such, he shifts the focus from the content of the good (morality, moral and ethical behavior, etc.) to how the good was produced. Thus, his analysis suggests that the content of the good is not a fixed value, but is on the contrary dependent upon the particular historical context of the period.

Reitan's book is structured thematically, with attention paid to chronology, consisting of an introduction, five chapters, and an epilogue. Each chapter deals with a variety of interconnected themes that flow seamlessly from one chapter to next, making this book both informative and easy to follow for those less familiar with the subject. The introduction concisely sets the stage for the exposition of the *rinrigaku* discourse by contextualizing it within the transforming epistemological conditions of the early Meiji period, which saw traditional Sino-Japanese trends, such as the study of Confucian classics,

pushed to the wayside in favour of Western methods and thought. Furthermore, Reitan introduces us to one of the primary themes that surround the work, namely the universal. The universal, as Reitan seeks to show throughout the book, played a pivotal role in the discourse as it provided a means of legitimizing moral claims by grounding them in a universal foundation.

The first chapter, "Civilization and Foolishness," delves deeper into the introduction and also introduces us to some of the key theorists found throughout the book, such as Inoue Tetsujirō (1856-1944) and Nakashima Rikizō (1858-1918). Following the opening up of Japan with the Meiji Restoration in 1868, there was an influx of new, Western ideas that challenged traditional Japanese thought. Chief amongst these new ideas penetrating Japan was Social Darwinism, which, coupled with the colonization of continental East Asia by Western powers, created the very real fear amongst the Japanese of being colonized themselves. Thus, as Reitan astutely observes, the emergence of *rinrigaku* was deeply rooted in the discourse over civilization that was prominent in the West (2). Introduced as a Western concept, "civilization" asserted the superiority of the West by making it the ideal model.
The *rinrigaku* scholars of the period, espousing theories influenced by Social Darwinism, sought to raise the level of Japanese civilization to that of the West. The framework of this discourse relied heavily upon the authority of universal truth, whereby "civilization" became the "telos to which all societies aspired and progressed" (13). However, as Reitan shows, progressing the "civility" of Japan to that of the West was not merely a matter of promoting "civilized" behaviour and Western style education but also a question of disciplining "uncivilized" behaviour in order to both eradicate it and to "substantiate civilization's claims of universality" (21).

The sources Reitan uses to substantiate these claims further enrich the study. One of his most interesting examples is the debate over the consumption of meat. Buddhist prohibitions of the consumption of meat were called into question by a number of *rinrigaku* scholars during this period as they were seen as anachronistic and superstitious. Here, meat became associated with what is "civil," while Buddhism was associated with ignorance and irrationality. Moreover, Reitan shows how those who defended traditional beliefs in some ways unintentionally

legitimized what they sought to challenge. With the historical context of the early Meiji period well established, Reitan shifts the focus of the second and third chapters to the concept of *rinrigaku* by first looking at its epistemology and then by examining its relationship with religion. Together with the overall aim of the book, the discussion is primarily concerned with the production of, rather than the content of *rinrigaku*. This approach has its strengths and limitations, but Reitan does a good job of ensuring that the content of the discourse is not overlooked.

The second chapter focuses primarily on four prominent intellectuals of the period: Nishi Amane, Inoue Tetsujirō, Katō Hiroyuki, and Nishimura Shigeki. Of central concern in this chapter is the influence of Western thought, primarily the aforementioned Social Darwinism and evolution, as well as utilitarianism. By drawing on utilitarianism, thinkers such as Nishi argued that the principle of the greatest good for the greatest number were the chief objectives of mankind. Thus, as Reitan argues, the material world "became objectified in a way that allowed it to serve as the final foundation for knowledge" which ultimately "gave rise to an empiricist methodology presupposing universal laws of nature apprehended through the application of instrumental reason, observation, verification, and evidence" (30-31). The material world as the ultimate foundation for knowledge led to the de-subjectification of nature, whereby nature became devoid of morality. Keeping with the theme of production, Reitan examines how this discourse was codified in philosophical dictionaries that began to emerge for the first time in the 1880s. These dictionaries, more than representing the actual meaning of the terms, show how they were used to steer the discussion in the direction of those defining the terms, in an effort to control the discourse.

The chapter that follows continues this theme by highlighting the debates that occurred between the *rinrigaku* and religious scholars. Though religious scholars offered the greatest challenge, as Reitan suggests, the religious scholars ultimately fell short in providing an adequate challenge as they only further strengthened the authority of *rinrigaku* (58). That being said, as the historical conditions of the Meiji period changed, so too did the debate, as there was a major shift in the discourse with the religious notion of "spirit" (80).

The fourth chapter of the book discusses more thoroughly the notion of spirit introduced in the third chapter. Here, Reitan turns to how the Social Darwinist and utilitarian theories that were held in such high regard in the previous decade began to lose favor to the German romantic notion of a moral spirit. The move from the concrete material conditions of utilitarianism to the abstract notion of a moral spirit was crucial in challenging the superiority of the West, as both Social Darwinism and utilitarianism were seen to have helped produce some of the notions of Japan's inferiority to the West (82-87). As Reitan notes, civilizational hierarchies became internalized "to demonstrate that each Japanese does indeed possess a self-conscious awareness of his or her own individuality" which asserted that while Japan may not yet have been on par with Western civilization, it was by no means "primitive" (85). In the final chapter, which discusses the construction of a national morality, Reitan continues to discuss the efforts that emerged during this period to create a uniquely Japanese morality.

The final chapter, along with the epilogue, appropriately contextualize the discourse on morality in the Meiji period as a kind of prehistory to the interwar and wartime periods. Returning to a similar theme developed in the first chapter, Reitan looks at how the dichotomy between "faithful subjects" (in the early Meiji period, the "civilized") and "dangerous thought" (in the late Meiji, anarchism and communism, previously the "uncivilized") emerged. Reitan does well to show that national morality and thus the "faithful subject" was contingent upon having a dangerous other in order to sustain its own validity. As such, he argues that the production of the good was as much a performative activity as it was descriptive (151).

The final chapter and epilogue highlight some of the strengths of Reitan's work, namely the complexity of the *rinrigaku* discourse of the early Meiji period and how it created the space for the emergence of the fascist discourse that would follow in the 1930s. These two sections, however, also highlight the one shortcoming that is evident throughout this work, namely the failure to contextualize the debate within the larger historical framework of global capitalism. Though this critique warrants a much more thorough examination than is possible in this review, it is worth noting that the emergence of a Japanese morality that emphasized the particularity of the national spirit while maintaining its

universal framework was not unique to Japan but is integrally related to the emergence of global capitalism. The totalizing nature of capitalist modernity that accompanied the Meiji Restoration radically transformed the values and social relations that had previously dominated society. The quest to establish a new moral foundation for Japanese society, aptly historicized by Reitan, thus forms a part of a greater historical dynamic. Such a link would have provided a richer historical account of the period by placing Japan within a global historical context. This limitation aside, Reitan's book serves as an excellent prehistory to the interwar and wartime periods and should be read by any scholar interested in the intellectual currents of the Meiji period.

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[1] For example Najita Tetsuo's *Japan: the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Japanese Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) examines the late Tokugawa to early twentieth century intellectual discourse in Japan, but the early Meiji period makes up only a small portion of the analysis. Likewise, Carol Gluck's *Japan's Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985) provides an excellent intellectual history of the late Meiji period. Furthermore, there are a number of major studies that focus on the post-Meiji intellectual history of Japan, see for example Harry Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture, and Community in Interwar Japan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) and *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Christopher Goto-Jones, *Political Philosophy in Japan: Nishida, the Kyoto School and Co-Prosperity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005); William Miles Fletcher, *The Search for a New Order: Intellectuals and Fascism in Prewar Japan* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

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