

Han, Jung-Sun N.: *An Imperial Path to Modernity. Yoshino Sakuzō and a New Liberal Order in East Asia, 1905–1937*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2013. ISBN: 978-0674-06571-0; 244 S.

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Much has been written on Yoshino Sakuzō and the controversial role of prewar Japanese liberalism in modern Japanese history. While some Japanese scholars argue that Yoshino was an Asian-minded intellectual critical of imperialist policy, others sought to emphasize the historical limits of „bourgeois liberalism“ by exposing its inherent imperialist motivations.¹ However, these interpretations typically analyze Yoshino’s works and his concept of democracy (*minponshugi*) within the confines of Japanese society. Hence, they tend to ignore the wider global context of international norms and values that set the framework for Japanese intellectuals during the Taishō era.² Furthermore, most studies tend to separate Yoshino’s critique of domestic politics from his critiques of foreign politics and the management of colonial rule. Jung-Sun N. Han challenges these traditional views by re-evaluating prewar Japanese liberalism within the context of cross-cultural interactions and diffusion of liberal ideas, institutions and practices.

Drawing on constructivist theories of International Relations to link Yoshino with the growing Japanese empire, Han pursues a twofold approach to investigating the intellectual (re-)orientation of the „new liberal project“ in Japan. First, she deals with liberalism as it relates to the construction and transformation of an international order from the late nineteenth century onwards. Second, she examines the adaptation of liberal ideals and the projection of these ideals onto the empire by focusing on the emergence of a small group of liberal intellectuals with Yoshino at the center. As she delves into an extensive body of sources, Han argues that the question of how to sustain and govern the Japanese empire within the framework of global imperial affairs was the leitmotif of Yoshino’s „new

liberal project“ (p. 189).

Han addresses these issues in six main chapters which are subdivided thematically, avoiding a chronological approach. The first chapter contextualizes the evolving thought of Yoshino’s new liberalism within its cultural and social milieu during the late Meiji and early Taishō periods. Introducing the historical debate between Yoshino and the right-wing Rōninkai of 1918 as a point of reference for analysis, Han focuses on the development of a „highly stratified educational system“ (p. 11 and *passim*), the ensuing genesis of an academic elite and the rapidly evolving print industry. Linking Yoshino’s early life to the dynamics of cultural interactions and the penetration of Japanese society by international rules and standards, Han argues that the internalization of Christian ethics and beliefs facilitated Yoshino’s conceptualization of international society as well as of the sovereignty of the nation-state. Both processes, though seemingly paradoxical, mutually strengthened one another and set the stage for the construction of the Japanese Empire in East Asia.

The second chapter analyzes the intellectual atmosphere Yoshino inherited from the Meiji world by reconstructing the oftentimes self-contradictory liberal discourse on imperialism. Han examines how the influence of Ebina Danjō and other Christian intellectuals as well as his formal education at Tōkyō Imperial University shaped Yoshino’s intellectual development at the time of the Russo-Japanese War. Embracing German social thought, Yoshino advocated the idea of an interventionist „organic state“ by fusing the ideas of competitive imperialism with state-centered ideologies critical of unfettered economic liberalism. In the third chapter, Han highlights the centrality of events in China in the formation of Yoshino’s concept of *minponshugi*. Mediated by international social norms of peaceful expansion, the liberal project of *minpon-*

¹ Matsuo Takayoshi, Profile of an Asian minded man, VII: Sakozō Yoshino, in: *Developing Economies* 5 (1967), pp. 388–404; Inoue Gendaishi Kaisetsu, in: Iwanami Kōza: *Nihon Rekishi*, Vol. 18, Tōkyō 1963.

² Peter Duus, Yoshinō Sakuzō: The Christian as Political Critic, in: *Journal of Japanese Studies* 4 (1978), pp. 301–326.

shugi originated from Yoshino's search for a solution to Japan's problems in Manchuria, China and Korea where anti-Japanese sentiment rapidly spread. By democratizing and liberalizing Japanese society, Yoshino envisioned Japanese individuals to become enlightened colonizers that in turn would become the foundation of a durable Japanese empire in Asia.

In the following chapter, Han explores how the colonial problem determined Yoshino's thinking about the Japanese state. As the Japanese colonial empire was challenged from its periphery in the wake of World War I, Yoshino joined the nation-wide critique of military rule in Korea and went even further by reconceptualizing Japanese modernity to renew the Japanese imperialist venture in the aftermath of the war. Han then goes on to locate Yoshino's work within the dialectic of empire and nation. While Yoshino dismissed the old state-centered goal of „rich nation, strong army“ and conceived of a pluralist culture as imperative for governing the multi-ethnic and multicultural Japanese empire, he „dangerously confused society with notion of ethnic community“ (p. 151). This, Han maintains, in turn made the new Imperial collectivity envisioned by Yoshino susceptible to the encroachment of particularism and racism inherent in Japanese ethnic identity. Moreover, Yoshino's new liberal project and „organic statism“ cultivated a social field favorable to state intervention as it functioned to neutralize the class appeal of labour parties.

Han continues to examine how Yoshino's vision of parliamentarianism was inherited and transformed by his disciple Rōyama Masamichi who popularized the notion of *kyōdōtai* (cooperative community). Toward this end, she analyzes the ideas and activities of Rōyama to assess how the legacy of Yoshino's new liberal project to create a pluralist and internationalist society blended with the logic of ultranationalism. Ultimately, Han argues, it was the rationalization of internationalist liberalism that led Rōyama to justify a Japan-centered regionalism culminating in military aggression during the 1930s. However, this regionalism was embedded into the transnational and global framework of progress and development rather than being

isolationist.

„An Imperial Path to Modernity“ is another important step forward in our understanding of the relationship between Japanese imperialism and domestic society in the early twentieth century and the ensuing distortions in the process of Japanese modernization. Linking Japanese liberals like Yoshino and Rōyama to the broader global context and the diffusion of Euro-centered norms in the international system, Han shows how transnational ideas were translated and internalized by Japanese liberals. Thus, the study impressively demonstrates the value of transnational foci that alter the understanding of already well established fields of historiography, as they highlight the importance of external factors in the formation of modern societies as well as the repercussions of colonialism on the metropolis. However, the question whether to speak of a mere diffusion of Euro-centered norms and values is Euro-centric itself or whether this has rather to be seen as a process of constant negotiation, discussion and appropriation goes beyond the scope of this study. Furthermore, the great impact of Christian faith on Yoshino's view of the world is mentioned only marginally.³ Nonetheless, „An Imperial Path to Modernity“ is a compelling and highly recommended reading that will appeal not only to historians of Japan, China and Korea, but also to a broader audience interested in global and transnational history of imperialism.

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³ Duus, Yoshinō Sakuzō, pp. 302–303.