

Beyond the surface of discourse



Edo Castle, from where the Tokugawa Shogunate ruled. Image reproduced under a Creative Commons license courtesy Flickr.com

Greater debate

A downside to the complexity and detail Guy presents is that the depth of the work is sometimes overwhelming, warranting at least a second read so as to fully grasp the overarching principles of the system and the examples that fit within these models. The author does not shy from highlighting the exceptions to the rules as well, creating a broad 'grey area' where unique events overrode general administrative patterns. If anything, the dynamism that Guy highlights in the ability of Qing provincial leadership to adapt to fluctuating imperial needs makes selecting examples that are relevant to more than one reign exceedingly difficult – though it does not make his selections (particularly accounts of intrigue and corruption) any less engrossing.

In the conclusion Guy briefly compares Chinese absolutism with that of contemporaneous European absolutist rulers. While accurate, in a text that inherently focuses on the internal dimensions of Qing rule, the comparisons to Europe seem tacked-on. They briefly address a topic that could comprise an entire comparative volume in its own right and add little to the main arguments beyond addressing Euro-centric scholarship that often dismisses the value of studying other political systems.

In the end Guy manages to muster and refine a daunting array of data into an extremely useful contribution. *Qing Governors and Their Provinces* certainly succeeds in creating linkages between imperial, regional, and local narratives, and Guy's more positive outlook on the capabilities of the Qing provincial bureaucracy is sure to spark greater debate over the true impact of Qing rule through the eighteenth century and beyond.

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Notes

- 1 Meyer-Fong, T. 2003. *Building Culture in Early Qing Yangzhou*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. Tobie Meyer-Fong's work reinforces Guy's assertion of local integration in the east. Fong shows how imperial touring and patronage of public space allowed the central government to gradually, but effectively, co-opt the elite of Yangzhou into supporting Qing rule.
- 2 Kuhn, P. 1990. *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1786*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

As a society ruled by status, life in Tokugawa Japan was highly compartmentalized. People, food, clothing, books, everything was organized into discrete hierarchal categories. Even though research has already shown that *in practice* these categories were more fluid than previously assumed, rigid compartmentalization continued to be at the core of political discourse throughout the period. What should we make of this discrepancy between reality and discourse? Incompetent rulers simply fooling themselves? Not likely. After all, they did manage to squeeze out more than 250 years of enduring peace. In Roberts' new monograph, we are presented with a compelling answer to this conundrum as he sets out the 'cultural logic' through which apparent contradictions between political reality and discourse were reconciled and, in fact, made perfect sense to contemporaries.

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ROBERTS DISCERNs THIS 'CULTURAL LOGIC' in the distinction made between *omote* (outside) and *uchi* (inside) spaces. By delegating the authority over domains to warlords, the Tokugawa government had created a feudal system; a polity of "sealed-off spaces" that "permitted interiors and exteriors to be incongruent" (p.5). Whereas previous research, influenced by modern conceptions and expectations of a penetrating and all powerful state, have interpreted this incongruence as a sign of weakness on part of the *bakufu* (shogunate; military government) to enforce its policies, Roberts argues that to contemporaries it constituted an "ideal form of politics" (p.196). As long as domains showed subservience in the *omote* adherence to official regulations, the *bakufu* was not concerned with the details of its *uchi* politics. Any incongruence between the two was simply acknowledged as an "open secret", a "mutually arranged management" of disobedience (p.7).

Open secrets

The image that Roberts paints is that of a performed political order. "The ability to command performance of duty – in the thespian sense when actual *performance* of duty might be lacking – was a crucial tool of Tokugawa power that effectively worked toward preserving the peace in the realm" (p.3). Each of the chapters in this book is a case study of one particular occasion in which this performance is used to negotiate discrepancies between *omote* and *uchi*. Although some of these performances might already be familiar to specialists of premodern Japanese politics, Roberts' treatment brings much added value; his extensive use of original archival sources has resulted in vivid narratives brimming with detail. The glimpses that these narratives offer into the "open secrets" of the day are as entertaining as they are enlightening. We learn for example that the *daimyo* (lord) of Tosa, in order to prepare for the *bakufu* Touring Inspectors, ordered that where rest houses should be built for the convenience of the Inspectors "old wood should be used so that they look like they have been there a long time" (p.62). Similarly, the domain officials of Tahara "had the roads swept but made sure that the broom marks were erased" (p.66).

The (mal?)practices of adoptions provide yet another example of the same kind of apparent idiosyncrasies. One of the Grand Inspectors, responsible for making sure the lord was alive while making his adoption request, all too frankly admits that "usually they were all dead and cold, but the family would lay him out on a futon behind a folding screen just as if he were alive. I act as if he is alive ... Some relative from behind the screen presses the lord's seal to

a document as if he did it himself" (p.79). By demonstrating that these open secrets only make sense when filtered through the 'cultural logic' of the *omote/uchi* dichotomy, and furthermore, by doing so through case studies from the early Tokugawa period when the power of the *bakufu* was at its prime, Roberts convincingly makes his case that the discrepancy between reality and discourse was at the heart of Tokugawa political culture, and did not *necessarily* signify waning authority.

Shared knowledge

As Roberts certainly succeeds in his aim to "create a space of acceptance for a certain cultural approach to interpreting the politics of the Tokugawa world" (p.198), it will be up to others to explore the details and limitations of this approach. Perhaps the most pressing issue in that regard is the question of formation. In contrast to the 'sealed-off' nature of *uchi* space, *omote* space requires a pool of shared knowledge amongst multiple 'Others', the formation of which, in a period of still immense cultural differences amongst geographical regions, poses a problem; who decided on the shape and content of *omote*, and how did people come to share these conceptions?

Previous scholarship has already demonstrated that these conceptions certainly were not created unilaterally by the *bakufu* at the start of the Tokugawa period. The *omote* identity of *meikun* (benevolent ruler), for example, came into being only in the specific socio-political conditions of the latter half of the seventeenth century, and only as the result of a dynamic discourse between *bakufu*, regional lords, and carriers of literary/philosophical tradition. Although Roberts has highlighted the *omote* 'performance' of regional lords vis-à-vis the *bakufu*, the origin of the script, as well as the roles of the other actors still remain to be clarified. In that sense, Roberts' work is one small piece in the puzzle of Tokugawa political culture, but it certainly is an important one, and will undoubtedly cause many of us to tread more carefully when dealing with the 'deceptive' nature of *omote* sources.

Comparative approach

Roberts has delivered an outstanding work. The research is thorough, the thesis is compelling, and the writing is clear. Add to that the variety of topics handled in the case studies, and one must conclude that this is a work that deserves to be read not only by specialists of political culture, but everyone with an interest in premodern Japanese culture and society. Roberts' emphasis, that although the *omote/uchi* dichotomy is appropriate to the Tokugawa setting, it "easily could be used to analyze and create a dialogue with the premodern histories of some non-Japanese places" (p. 197), is surely an invitation to scholars of other cultures to engage in a comparative approach as well.

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