

Medieval Japan

Columbia Asia for Educators

May 22, 2025

Matthieu Felt
Assistant Professor of Japanese
University of Florida
mfelt@ufl.edu

Talk Outline

- When, Where, and What is Medieval Japan
- Medieval Japan and the World
- Problems for Teaching Medieval Japan
- Recent Developments in Knowledge about Medieval Japan
- Major Works and (relatively) New Translations

When, Where, and What is Medieval Japan

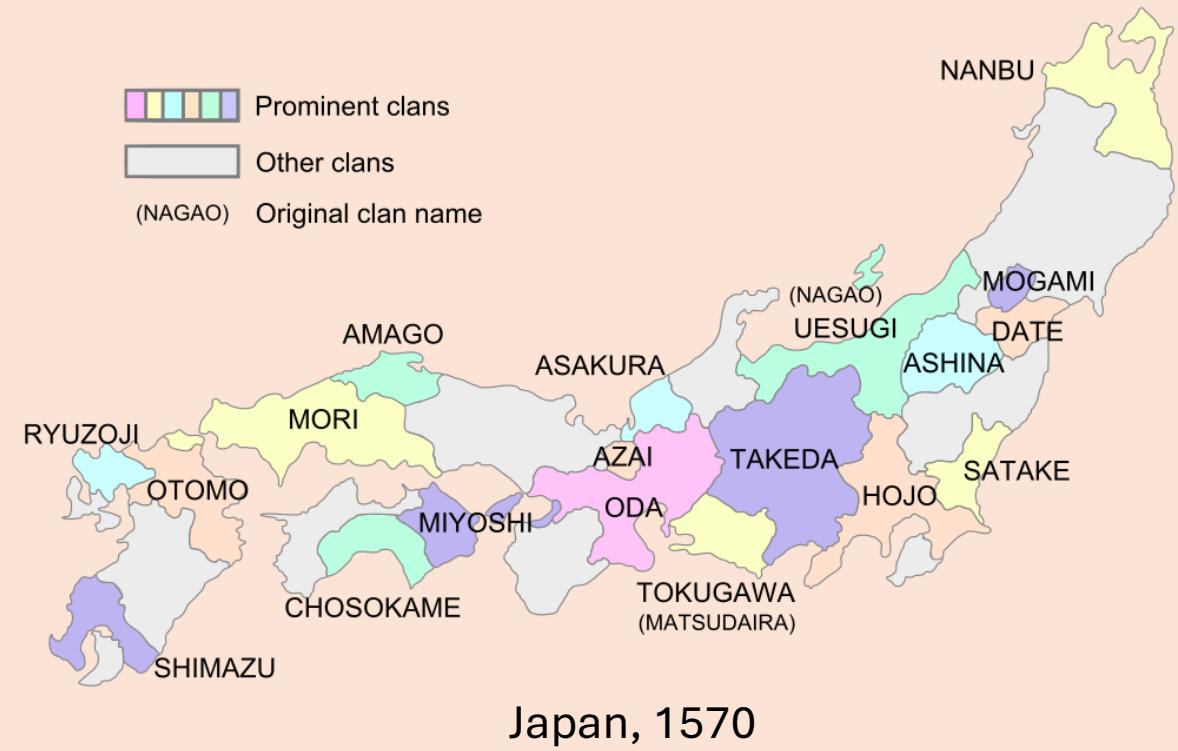
Japanese Historical Periods

- Tomb Period / Asuka Period (before 710 CE; no fixed capital)
- Classical Period (710-1185; capitals in Nara and Kyoto)
- Medieval Period (1185-1600; capitals in Kamakura and Kyoto)
- Edo or Early Modern Period (1600-1868; capital in Edo/Tokyo)
- Modern Period (1868-present; capital in Tokyo)



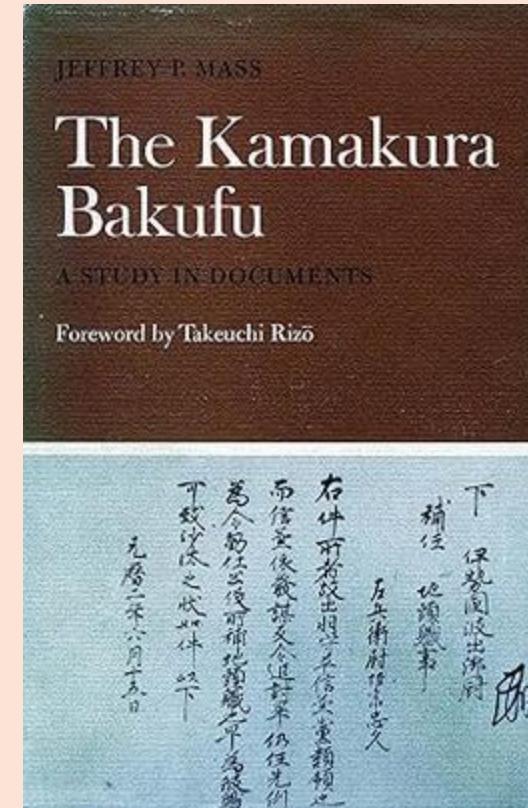
Japanese Historical Periods

- Medieval Period (1185-1600;
capitals in Kamakura and
Kyoto)
 - **Kamakura period (1185-1333)**
 - Kenmu Restoration (1333-1336)
 - Northern/Southern Courts Period
(1336-1392)
 - **Muromachi Period (1336-1573)**
 - Sengoku Period (c. 1467-1573)
 - **Azuchi-Momoyama Period
(1573-1603)**



Characteristics of Medieval Japan

- Military governments (jitō and shugo)
- New schools of Buddhism
- New arts and aesthetics



Jeffrey Mass, Stanford U. Press, 1976

Characteristics of Medieval Japan

- Military governments (jitō and shugo)
- New schools of Buddhism
 - Pure land Buddhism
 - Nichiren Buddhism
 - Zen Buddhism
- New arts and aesthetics



Nishi-honganji temple,
Kyoto



Statue of Shinran
New York

Characteristics of Medieval Japan

- Military governments (jitō and shugo)
- New schools of Buddhism
- New arts and aesthetics
 - Classical aesthetics
 - Wabi-sabi
 - Tea ceremony
 - Noh theatre
 - Shoin architecture



Shogun (fictional 16th cen.)
FX, 2024

Characteristics of Medieval Japan

- Military governments (jitō and shugo)
- New schools of Buddhism
- New arts and aesthetics
 - Classical aesthetics
 - Wabi-sabi
 - Tea ceremony
 - Noh theatre
 - Shoin architecture



Oribe Teabowl, 1600–1610, glazed stoneware, 6.3 × 11.3 × 13.5 cm, Princeton University Art Museum purchase, Fowler McCormick, Class of 1921, Fund, and gift of the Department of Art and Archaeology in honor of Andrew Watsky, P.Y. and Kinmay W. Tang Professor of Chinese and Japanese Art, upon the occasion of his retirement from the University; Photo courtesy of Princeton University Art Museum

Characteristics of Medieval Japan

- Military governments (jitō and shugo)
- New schools of Buddhism
- New arts and aesthetics
 - Classical aesthetics
 - Wabi-sabi
 - Tea ceremony (+ikebana)
 - Noh theatre
 - Shoin architecture



Characteristics of Medieval Japan

- Military governments (jitō and shugo)
- New schools of Buddhism
- New arts and aesthetics
 - Classical aesthetics
 - Wabi-sabi
 - Tea ceremony
 - Noh theatre
 - Shoin architecture



Characteristics of Medieval Japan

- Military governments (jitō and shugo)
- New schools of Buddhism
- New arts and aesthetics
 - Classical aesthetics
 - Wabi-sabi
 - Tea ceremony
 - Noh theatre
 - Shoin architecture



Medieval Japan and the world

- Religious travel
- Mongol invasions
- Christianity
- Japanese missions to Rome
- Invasion of Korea



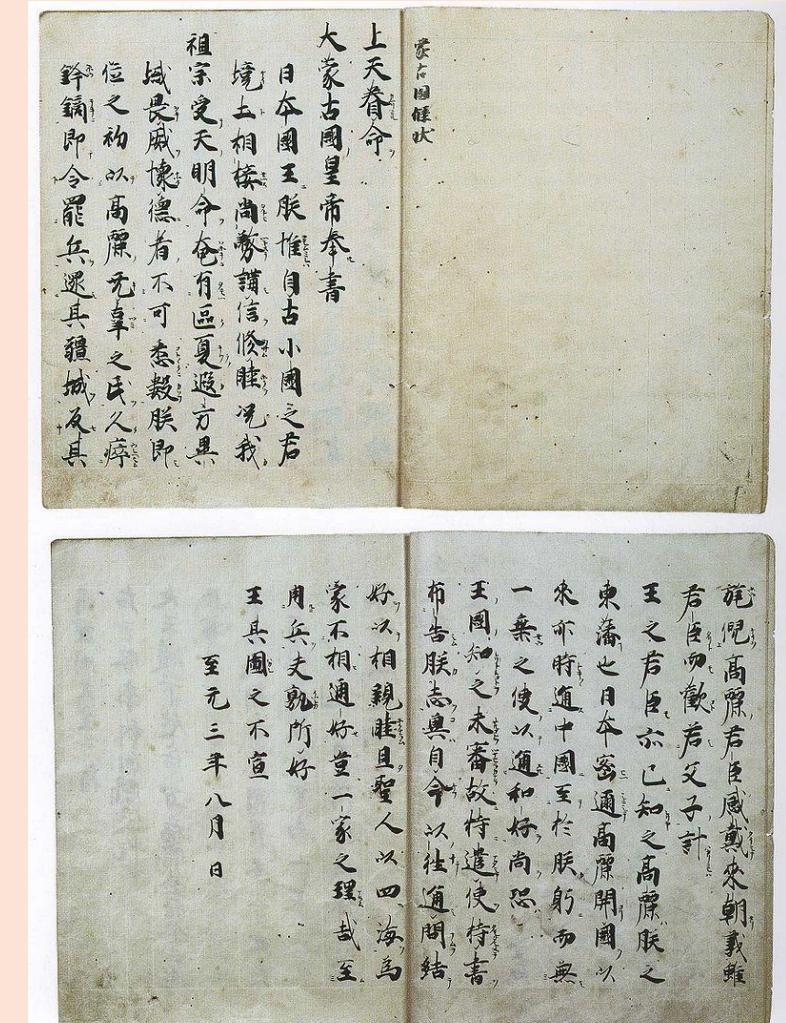
Eisai, visits China 1187-1191
*brings back tea

Medieval Japan and the world

- Religious travel
- Mongol invasions
- Christianity
- Japanese missions to Rome
- Invasion of Korea



<https://digital.princeton.edu/mongol-invasions/index.php>



Letter from Kublai Khan
Todaiji, Nara

Medieval Japan and the world

- Religious travel
- Mongol invasions
- Christianity
- Japanese missions to Rome
- Invasion of Korea



Banner of Amakusa Shiro, Shimbara Rebellion, 1637

Medieval Japan and the world

- Religious travel
- Mongol invasions
- Christianity
- Japanese missions to Rome
- Invasion of Korea



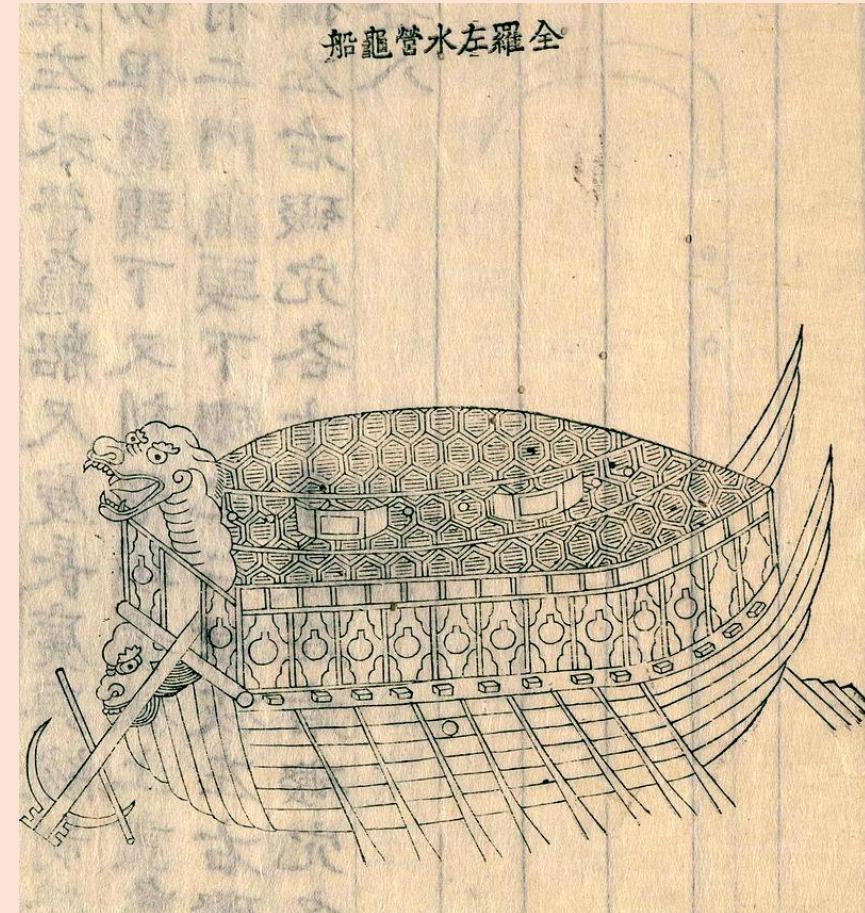
Japanese Embassy with Pope Gregory, 1585



Hasekura Tsunenaga in Rome, 1615

Medieval Japan and the world

- Religious travel
- Mongol invasions
- Christianity
- Japanese missions to Rome
- Invasion of Korea



Korean “Turtle Ship”

Problems for Teaching Medieval Japan

The Feudalism Problem – The Samurai Problem – The Bushido Problem

Problems for Teaching Medieval Japan

- The feudalism problem
- The samurai problem
- The bushido problem

Japan, with its purely feudal organization (*rein feudalen Organisation*) of landed property and its developed *petite culture*, gives a much truer picture of the European middle ages than our own history books, dictated as these are, for the most part, by bourgeois prejudices.

Karl Marx, *Capital*

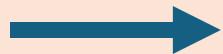
Hall, John Whitney. “Feudalism in Japan: A Reassessment.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1962), 15-51

Friday, Karl. “The Futile Paradigm: In Quest of Feudalism in Early Medieval Japan.” *History Compass*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2010), 179-196.

Problems for Teaching Medieval Japan

- The feudalism problem
- The samurai problem
- The bushido problem

Sabiye. Agua de algun profundo, o remanso de río, que está turbia por no correr mucho.
Saburai. Hidalgo, o hombre honrado.
Saburai, ó, óta. Ser, auer, &c. S.
Saburai docoro. Sala delantera donde espera la gente noble antes de entrar la sala interior.



1630 Spanish translation of
1603 *Nippo Jisho*



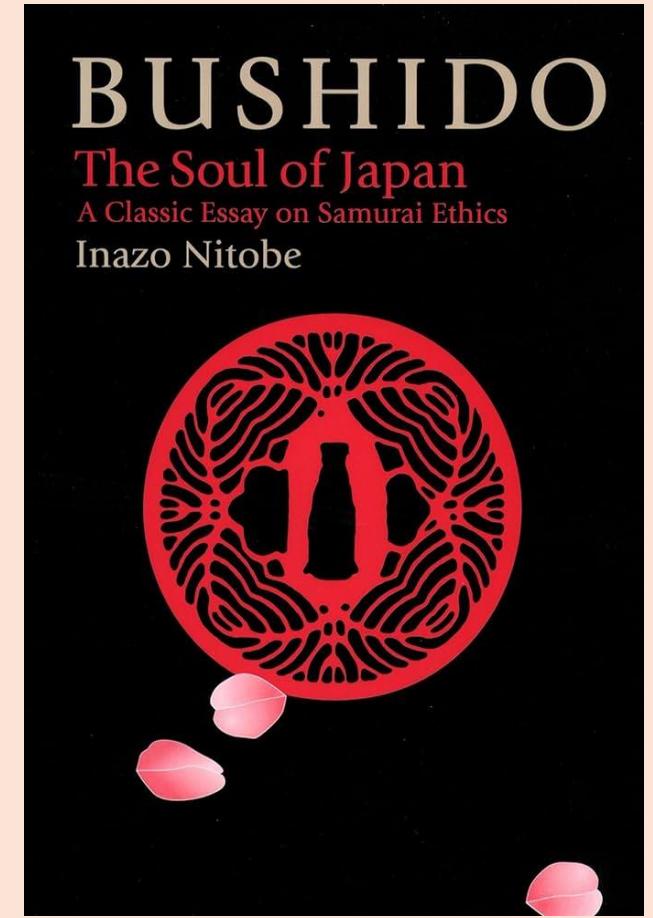
Sakawa Hansui, “The Four Professions”
19th cen.

Problems for Teaching Medieval Japan

- The feudalism problem
- The samurai problem
- The bushido problem



Musui's Story: The Autobiography of a Tokugawa Samurai
Tr. Teruko Craig
(U. Arizona, 1988)



1899 book by Nitobe Inazo

Recent Developments

- Spread of Buddhism
- Women
- Occupations of “peasants”
- Sources

Bryan D. Lowe: "A Temple in Every Village? Buddhism's Spread in Seventh- through Ninth-Century Japan"

Date

Tuesday March 12th 2024, 5:00PM

Event Sponsor

The Ho Center for Buddhist Studies

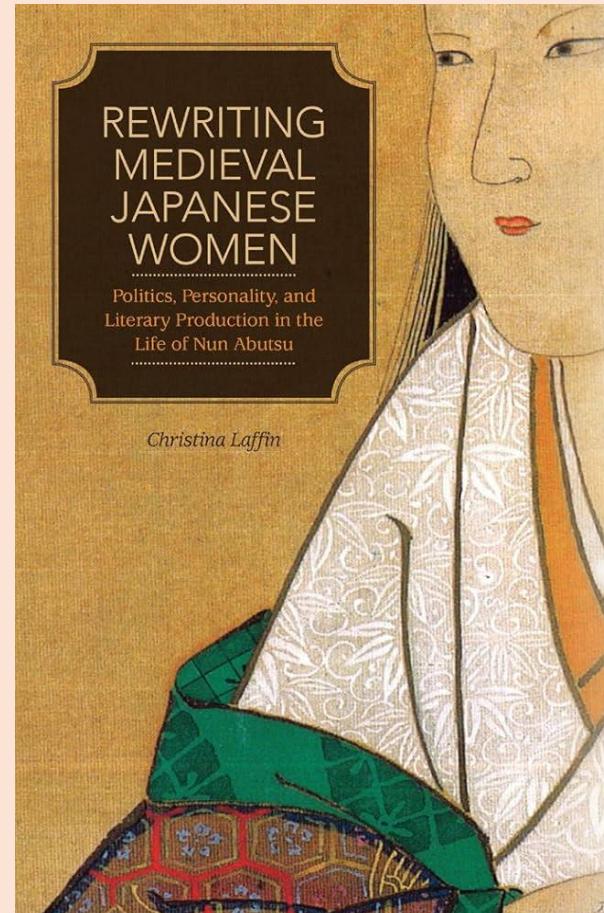
Location

Stanford East Asian Library, Room 224

There were only 46 temples in Japan in 624. In 838, the Japanese monk Ensai told a Chinese official there were 3,700 monasteries and many convents as well. Was this a reasonable claim? Had Japan really gone from having almost no temples and all of them standing in the capital region to the equivalent of a temple in every village in roughly two centuries? In this presentation, I will argue that while every village may not have had its own temple, it is likely that most people in ninth-century Japan would have been able to walk to a humble place of worship to pray before a Buddhist image and listen to a traveling preacher. My presentation will begin by assessing Ensai's assertion and will then outline three phases of temple construction that resulted in Buddhism penetrating village life, even in remote provinces. In short, I will tell the story of how Buddhism spread in Japan.

Recent Developments

- Spread of Buddhism
- Women
- Occupations of “peasants”
- Sources



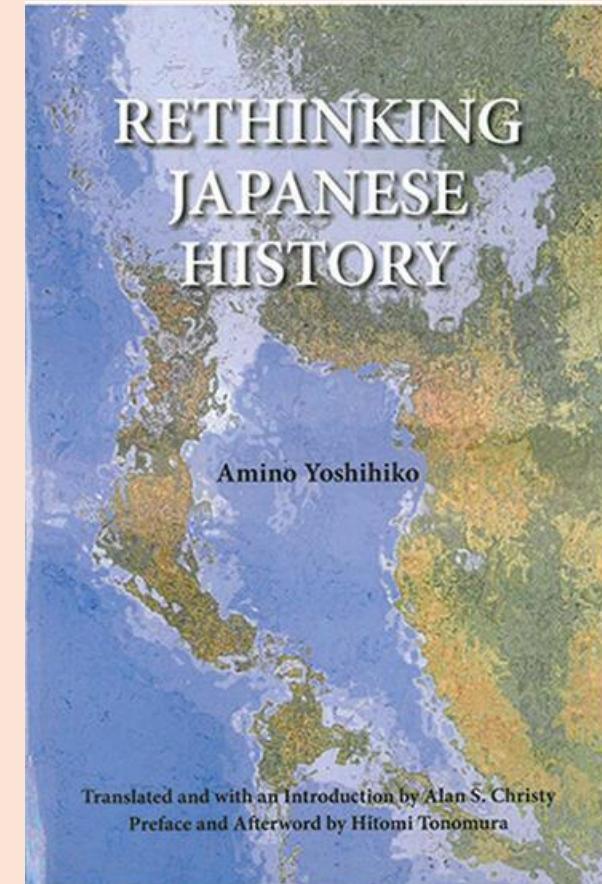
2013 book by Christina Laffin (UBC)

A screenshot of a YouTube channel page for "THE NUN SHOGUN". The channel banner features a portrait of a woman with long dark hair, identified as Hōjō Masako. The banner text includes "Hōjō Masako Shogun Nun", "THE NUN SHOGUN", "HŌJŌ MASAKO", "HISTORY DETECTIVE", and "Watch on YouTube". Below the banner, there are two buttons: a green one on the left that says "CLICK HERE FOR YOUTUBE TEACHING RESOURCES AT TEACHERS PAY TEACHERS." and a red one on the right that says "CLICK HERE FOR YOUTUBE TEACHING RESOURCES ON AMPED UP LEARNING". At the bottom, there is a thumbnail for a video titled "History Detective | S1:EP3 The Nun Shogun Hōjō Masako", showing a play button and the video's duration of 14:00. The channel has 80,000 subscribers and 14,000 views.

2023 podcast

Recent Developments

- Spread of Buddhism
- Women
- Occupations of “peasants”
- Sources



2012 book by Amino Yoshihiko

Recent Developments

- Spread of Buddhism
- Women
- Occupations of “peasants”
- Sources



方形区画墓SX333

Rokuhara site
Discovered 05/2019

Major Works and (relatively) New Translations

- Tyler, Royall trans. (2014) *The Tale of the Heike*. Penguin.
- McKinney, Meredith. (2013). *Essays in Idleness and Hojoki*. Penguin.
- Miraldo, John, Thomas Kasulis, and James Heisig. (2011). *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*. University of Hawai'i Press.
- Shirane, Haruo, ed. (2006). *Traditional Japanese Literature: An Anthology, Beginnings to 1600*. Columbia University Press.