Most historians agree that the past is a complex weave of many factors. Roughly speaking, I always like to divide the past into four overarching aspects: political, social, economic, and cultural. Within these categories, there are numerous subdivisions, so that political, for example, might include elite versus local rule, questions of legitimacy, warfare, institutions, and so on. Moreover, the boundaries among these categories are often overlapping. For instance, questions of political legitimacy often involve cultural factors such as religion and art. It is no wonder that there are so many different kinds of history, written by historians with their own agendas. Such bounty is to be welcomed rather than disdained, because no single historian can do justice to all the historical factors in play.

Within this framework for analysis, Thomas Conlan's *Kings in All but Name: The Lost History of Ôuchi Rule in Japan, 1350-1569* is one of the finest books ever written on what is commonly known as medieval Japan (1100-1600). Exhaustively researched, *Kings in All but Name* traces the rise and fall of one of Japan's most well-known samurai warlords (the Ôuchi family) over nine generations. In the course of this basically political narrative, Conlan deals with many complex factors with great skill: elite politics, religious beliefs, Japan’s overseas relations (especially with Korea), cultural phenomena, money and trade, and the causes, course, and outcomes of warfare. In essence, this stimulating book proposes a new periodization for what has traditionally been called the Warring States' Era (1467-1598), arguing instead for an “Ôuchi period” covering the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Whether this thesis will ultimately prevail, I cannot say: it must be debated and stand the test of time.

On its face, *Kings in All but Name* is the story of the rise and fall of the Ôuchi family, beginning with Hiroyo around 1325 and ending with total collapse under the misfortunate Ôtomo Haruhide.
(also known as Hachirô). Hiroyo began by conquering Nagato, strengthening his claims to lordship, taking over the Straits of Shimonoseki, starting to exploit mines in western Japan, and founding the long-time Ôuchi capital at Yamaguchi. Perhaps his heir (Yoshihiro) made his greatest contribution to his family’s rule by sending emissaries to the newly ascendent Choson dynasty in Korea and claiming descent from the ancient Paekche royal line. While the Ôuchi were descended from a sixth-century (or so) Kaya immigrant family called the Tatara (bellows), they would continuously claim Paekche royal ancestors for much of their existence.

The third lord, Moriakira, was particularly deft in extending Ôuchi rule through extensive copper and silver exchange with Korea, participating in what has been called “the East China Sea Network.” There followed a period of internecine turmoil during 1397-1441. Institutions held, however. The next period witnessed a revival under Norihiro (1420-65), who created a western warrior government in Yamaguchi by expanding the Ôuchi realm over all of western Honshu and northern Kyushu. Under his successor, Masahiro, the Ôuchi played a crucial role in the Ônin Wars, which, according to Conlan, were really a struggle between that lord and the incompetent Ashikaga Yoshi masa. Masahiro won out, throttling Ashikaga shipping in the Inland Sea and ruling sections of Kyoto better than the Ashikaga. He used religion to buttress his rule by establishing Yamaguchi as a site for major rites greater than anything performed in Kyoto during the period following the war from 1477 through 1495. Outshining Kyoto, Yamaguchi became the de facto capital of “Japan.”

Ôuchi rule reached its apogee under Yoshioki during 1477-1528. Yoshioki installed a pro-Ôuchi shogun in Kyoto. Trade in precious metals continued to boom, as the cargo from one ship netted Yoshioki more than the rent from one of his many provinces. Yoshioki seized the title “King of Japan,” once held by the Ashikaga shogun, and belonged to the high court nobility at the exalted Third Rank. Coins also poured into Ôuchi domains from Ming China, helping partially to monetize the economy. Yoshioki’s heir, Yoshitaka, was the last great lord of the samurai family, eventually exceeding his authority and being overthrown in a coup in 1551. Subsequent efforts to revive Ôuchi power were in vain. Yamaguchi burned and much of the record of Ôuchi efflorescence was destroyed.

As noted above, history is a weave of many factors, and Conlan is especially adroit at intertwining three into his narrative. First, the author’s command of medieval religion and thought and the Ôuchi manipulation of them serve as constant themes. As a ruling family that relied heavily on shipping and overseas trade, it is no surprise that they worshipped the “Venerable Star King” (Myôken), associated with the Big Dipper and Polaris, as the protector of the state. Eventually the Myôken cult spread widely, but Ôuchi propitiation of the deities hardly ended there. The samurai lords built and rebuilt many shrines and temples. For example, when Usa Hachiman Shrine, an institution with a long pedigree and great archipelago-wide importance fell into ruin in the 1380s, it was the lord Yoshihiro who undertook reconstruction. Usa Hachiman remained in Ôuchi hands and served local purposes to the end. Itsukushima Shrine in the Inland Sea was restored and claimed by Yoshitaka in 1541. Yoshitaka also developed ties to Yoshida Shinto and used its rites to bolster his rule.

Second, elite cultural historians will learn much from Conlan’s book. It should come as no surprise that Yamaguchi became a major cultural center at the apogee of Ôuchi power. Artists and literary figures flocked there. As a function of their trade with Choson Korea, the Ôuchi repeatedly imported the entire Buddhist canon (the Tripitaka) to their domain. Yoshioki patronized the arts and had numerous invaluable copies made of Japanese classics, including *The Tale of*
Genji, Azuma kagami, and The Tale of Ônin. Emphasizing their Korean heritage, they brought pen-
insular artisans to their domain to make Korean-
style roof tiles for the mortuary temple of lord 
Hiroyo (Jôfukuji).

Third, Kings in All but Name underlines the 
importance of Korea (and all East Asia) in mediev-
al Japanese history, not simply because of the family's origins. The Ôuchi fictionalized claims of 
Paekche ancestry through the created story of 
Prince Imsong, who was made a progenitor of 
Buddhism in the tale. The Choson court readily ad-
opted the tale as true. The Choson court knew well 
of the Ôuchi because they traded with them and 
considered them the equal, if not the superior of, 
the Ashikaga shoguns, especially under Norihiro. 
He was recognized as “the fiercest general of his 
generation and the scion of an ancient kingly 
house” (p. 179). Together, Choson Korea and the 
Ôuchi domain acted as a check on the trouble-
some pirates who pillaged East Asian shipping.

Kings in All but Name also includes valuable 
passages on the tally trade between medieval Ja-
pan and Ming China. There is much information 
on the importation of Ming currency to the realm 
and the regulation of coins in Kyoto and the Ôuchi 
domain. When the famous painter Sesshû Tôyô so-
journed to Ming China, he preferred Ôuchi spon-
sorship over Ashikaga. After the Iberians arrived 
in Japan, they visited Yamaguchi, describing it as a 
“great city” of perhaps 10,000 (pp. 331-332). When 
the Iberians enter the story, the narrative borders 
on true world history. Conlan has thus done his-
torians a great service by beginning to set mediev-
al Japan in its world historical context.

Few historians are able to command a thor-
ough knowledge of every historical factor, and I 
thought that Conlan handled one factor (mining 
and metallurgy) inadequately and dismissed and 
ignored two more. Concerning mining, he deals 
with three metals. His worst error regards iron, 
because he writes of Japan’s “rich” supply of the 
metal and apparently believes that what iron exis-
ted in Japan was “mined.” Actually, in Japan the 
metal was produced from iron sand (satetsu) 
found at the bottom of rivers in western Japan. 
Much of Japan’s iron for weapons and tools was 
recycled from worn or broken implements 
brought long ago from Korea. This point is a 
minor mistake, however.

The discussion of precious metals is much 
more thoroughgoing, but Conlan never places his 
interpretations of copper in the context of previ-
ous scholarship. It is well known that western 
Honshu was the major source for the copper coins minted during the ancient period (700-1100). In 
fact, the Office of the Mint (Chûsen shi) was loc-
ated in Suô province. The minting of copper coins 
ended in the eleventh century, perhaps because 
the ancient mines were exhausted.[1]

The question arises: When did the mining of 
copper resume? What were the first mines like? An 865-word passage in Nihon sandai jitsuroku 
describes a silver mine on Tsushima as 120 meters 
deep vertically and filled with water. Were later 
mines also like that? How did mines change over 
the course of two centuries? Where did the every-
day laborers (touched on briefly on p. 111 for one 
mine) come from? Were they conscripted from the 
general populace or were there specialists? These 
same questions arise for silver mining.

Most unfortunately, Conlan simply dismisses 
any historical factor that he cannot or chooses not 
to examine. In his introduction (p. 6), Conlan rails 
against the “durable trope” of farming as an im-
portant, perhaps even central, occupation in medi-
eval Japan. According to the author, the bias oc-
curs because land tax and confirmation records 
survive in abundance. One might add records of 
famine and hunger! Conlan writes, as noted 
above, that one shipment of precious metals paid 
the Ôuchi more handsomely than the revenues 
from one of their provinces. I do not doubt this as-
sertion.

Yet the author’s own prose upends his as-
sumptions about farming. On p. 148, the author
quotes a 1439 regulation “prohibiting cultivators from fleeing their lands” and ordering such peasants to be “captured, bound, and returned.” Why even promulgate such a law if agriculture was unimportant? And how was the population of Yamaguchi, for example, fed? What about provisioning for all those armies, miners, laborers, artisans, monks, and merchants? To be sure, Japan before 1600 was not the agrocentric society of the Tokugawa or early Meiji era, but it was on its way—increasingly after 1400.

Conlan’s most telling assumption is his inversion of Amino Yoshihiko’s view that history is best understood from the bottom up. For Conlan, the facts “suggest the opposite” (p. 6). To be sure, the author shows that the Ôuchi helped organize and lead mining, trade, and currency policies, but the objects of this organization and leadership are missing. For Conlan, the history of premodern Japan is coterminous with the story of the samurai. It is little wonder that not a single commoner (certainly not peasants!) appears in his book. Instead, the reader is subjected to the tedious and triumphalist ups and downs of a handful of elite samurai. They may have been individuals, but they all had one goal—expand their lands, armies, and political controls. In my view, they were all “macroparasites,” living off the labor and produce of the vast unnamed commoner classes. Talk about lost histories.

Notwithstanding these considerable flaws, *Kings in All but Name* is a must-read for all premodern Japanese historians, and those scholars interested in Japan’s place in world history.

Note


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