

Discussion Point 1: Early Modern or Pre-Modern?



Abstract This section addresses the question of whether the Edo period was pre-modern or actually the start of Japan’s modern economic era. Its conclusion: overall, the former is more accurate.

The “Novelties” of the Edo Period

In the first half of Part I, we focused on the Edo period and examined three cases: (1) Zen’emon Konoike, who introduced a series of innovative practices on a national scale; (2) Takatoshi Mitsui, who inaugurated retail innovation in response to new business opportunities; and (3) Genzaemon Nakai, who seized business opportunities and was active in the national market despite being a local merchant. These merchants were the driving force behind significant economic growth, one of the hallmarks of the Edo period (especially the seventeenth century).

Their innovative activities were made possible by the “novelties” of the Edo period, marked especially by the development of a market economy. Among the scholars who have focused on this point and made bold arguments is Matao Miyamoto.

Matao Miyamoto’s “Edo Period = Early Modern” Theory

Miyamoto focuses on the “novelties” of the Edo period and views Edo as belonging to the early modern period.¹ This is an influential argument that calls for a fundamental shift in the conventional view of the Edo period as a feudalistic and pre-modern period, distinct from the modern era.

Miyamoto raises the following six points as the basis for his “Edo Period = Early Modern” theory:

¹The following summary of the Early Modern Theory is from *op. cit.*, Miyamoto, M. (2007), pp. 1–5.

1. The authoritative power of archaic forces such as the imperial court, aristocrats, and temples and shrines had decisively receded. This meant the collapse of the long-lasting, Ritsuryo system of administration and the manor system, as well as the decline of religious power.
2. Widening geographical reach of economic activities: The establishment of intra- and inter-fief markets facilitated the formation of a Japan-wide “national economy” thriving locally and nationally.
3. Major transformation of the environment such as improvements in civil engineering and irrigation technology, as well as the introduction of new rice varieties encouraging farmers to permanently settle in fixed areas while commercial and industrial workers settled in cities, contributing to the growth of urban areas.
4. The class system of “samurais, farmers, artisans, and merchants” encouraged the division of labor. This, in turn, led to the reduction of subsistence-farming and the growth of commodity transactions and monetary economy.
5. Japan’s isolationist policy reflected its desire to minimize the influence of China and of the West. It enabled Japan to remain basically free from the Sino-centric “Hua–Yi” [“China or barbarians” perspective] order that had existed since ancient times, and also from the growing encroachment into Asia of European powers that had intensified since the mid-sixteenth century.
6. The standardization of a national currency, virtually for the first time in Japanese history. The Edo period also saw the standardization of weights and measures, as well as the development of new transportation methods.

The above is an overview of Miyamoto’s “Edo Period = Early Modern” theory. The overall argument is solid, and his positive evaluation of the “samurai, farmer, artisan, and merchant” system and of Japan’s isolationist policy is quite refreshing.

Prerequisites for Japanese Economy’s Early Takeoff

Nevertheless, I consider the Edo period to be pre-modern, and not belonging to the modern era, due to the existence of the class system of “samurai, farmers, artisans, and merchants.” The presence or absence of a class system is a decisive benchmark distinguishing pre-modern from modern. Nevertheless, Japan in the Edo period undeniably featured “novelties” that were distinct from the conventional feudal period. Thus, the Edo period was a time when feudalism and the market economy had come to coexist.

In the [Introduction](#), the first of the three questions pertaining to Japanese business history was: “What enabled Japan’s economy to take off so early on a growth path?” I attribute the early takeoff to the presence of a feudal society featuring “novelties,” that served as an important prerequisite.

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