

The Worst Shôgun

Yoshimasa and the Silver Pavilion, by Donald Keene '42CC '50GSAS (Columbia University Press).

By

J. Thomas Rimer '71GSAS

|

Fall 2003

Donald Keene '42CC '50GSAS, the Columbia professor known as the premier American scholar of Japanese literature, has moved into cultural history with his last two books. His extraordinary study of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Japan, *Emperor of Japan: Meiji and His World*, published a year ago (also by Columbia University Press), is followed by this new account of the sixth Shôgun of the Ashikaga family, Yoshimasa (1434–90), best remembered for his cultural patronage in medieval Japan. Extensively researched, both studies still read with Keene's characteristic simplicity and assurance.

Yoshimasa was, as Keene puts it, “probably the worst Shôgun,” in his political dealings at least, in the history of the Ashikaga family. His famous grandfather, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (1358–1408), had done much to hold the country together and reopen trade relations with China; in addition, Yoshimitsu was a great patron of the arts, notably Zeami and the *nô* theatre. Yoshimasa, on the other hand, helped bring about what is referred to as the Ônin War, a protracted and destructive conflict in which battles raged through the capital city of Kyoto. What Keene has done in the first part of the study is to provide the necessary details—some breath-taking, some appalling—of the political and social conditions at the time, over which Yoshimasa could exercise little control.

The political situation described in the book is as complex and as grim as that in any Renaissance Italian court. Factions vying for power, women behind the scenes manipulating their men, stabbings, and backstabblings are the backdrop to these decades. Despite Keene's skill, some early sections need close reading to keep the

generations and the factions and counterfactions straight.

Yoshimasa, and Keene's descriptions of him, really come to fruition in the latter half of the book, after the period when Yoshimasa, discouraged by the chaos around him, retires to his new Higashiyama retreat and becomes a patron of the arts. Like his grandfather, he became a significant supporter of the *nô* theatre, and he served as a patron for a number of poets and artists, chosen by ability rather than social status. He gave important impetus to garden design and the art of the tea ceremony, and many of the precedents established at this time became the basis for traditions that developed for hundreds of years and still persist today.

Keene's descriptions present a crucial observation about how tradition is understood and used by later generations. As he points out in considerable—and fascinating—detail, many of the arts that the Japanese, even now at the beginning of our present century, look on as fixed in their parameters since time immemorial turn out to have begun or been significantly altered by Yoshimasa and the artists of his generation. Traditions, Keene wisely reminds us, are purposefully created. Knowing their origins helps us to grasp both their significance and their limitations. Every culture, of course, seeks precedents, since the presence of a tradition brings a sense of national veneration, resulting in perhaps more dubious cases in a kind of sanctification of the past. But in Keene's poised and observant account, we can see how traditions are made, and for what purposes. His book not only shines light on the way in which Japanese cultural history has been constructed, but also gives readers a heightened sense of how the same kind of clear and dispassionate observation of any set of events could help us understand the sometimes arbitrary structures into which our own past has been placed.

Thomas Rimer is a professor of Japanese literature at the University of Pittsburgh.

Read more from

J. Thomas Rimer '71GSAS



[Guide to school abbreviations](#)

[All categories >](#)

Read more from

J. Thomas Rimer '71GSAS