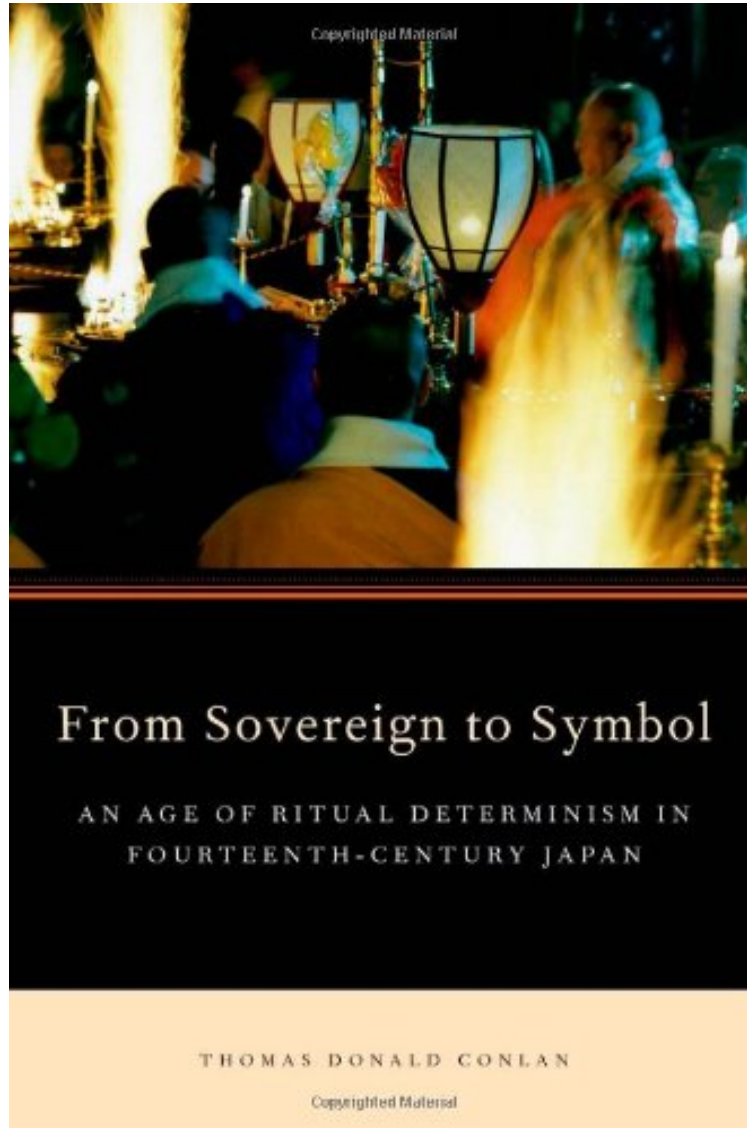


From Sovereign to Symbol: An Age of Ritual Determinism in Fourteenth Century Japan

Thomas Donald Conlan

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Thomas Donald Conlan : From Sovereign to Symbol: An Age of Ritual Determinism in Fourteenth Century Japan before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised From Sovereign to Symbol: An Age of Ritual Determinism in Fourteenth Century Japan:

Fourteenth-century Japan witnessed a fundamental political and intellectual conflict about the nature of power and society, a conflict that was expressed through the rituals and institutions of two rival courts. Rather than understanding the collapse of Japan's first warrior government (the Kamakura bakufu) and the onset of a chaotic period of civil war as the manipulation of rival courts by powerful warrior factions, this study argues that the crucial ideological and intellectual conflict of the fourteenth century was between the conservative forces of ritual precedent and the ritual determinists steeped in Shingon Buddhism. Members of the monastic nobility who came to dominate the court used the language of Buddhist ritual, including incantations (mantras), gestures (mudras), and "cosmograms" (mandalas projected onto the geography of Japan) to uphold their bids for power. Sacred places that were ritual centers became the targets of military capture precisely because they were ritual centers. Ritual was not simply symbolic; rather, ritual became the orchestration, or actual dynamic, of power in itself. This study undermines the conventional wisdom that Zen ideals linked to the samurai were responsible for the manner in which power was conceptualized in medieval Japan, and instead argues that Shingon ritual specialists prolonged the conflict and enforced the new notion that loyal service trumped the merit of those who simply requested compensation for their acts. Ultimately, Shingon mimetic ideals enhanced warrior power and enabled Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, rather than the reigning emperor, to assert sovereign authority in Japan.

"Thomas Conlan greatly advances our understanding of the most intractable, understudied, yet pivotal century of Japanese history. His book is a multi-pronged study of warfare and Shingon ritual, both of which--after evolving over several centuries--came to play a crucial role in the legitimacy crisis of imperial rule, as two fourteenth-century emperors fought over the throne." -- Herman Ooms, Author of *Imperial Politics and Symbolics in Ancient Japan: The Tenmu Dynasty, 650-800* "Thomas Conlan, a historian specializing in fourteenth-century Japan, has written of the military events and developments of that tumultuous age. In *From Sovereign to Symbol* he turns his attention to the great dynastic conflict of the fourteenth century that rent the imperial family, producing two emperors and two courts. In a fascinating and persuasive new approach to the period, Conlan contends that masters of the rituals of Shingon Buddhism directed the course of rulership that led eventually to the establishment of Yoshimitsu, head of the Ashikaga warrior house, as a virtual emperor. -- H. Paul Varley, professor emeritus at Columbia University and Sen Soshitsu XV Professor of Japanese Cultural History at the University of Hawaii "Japan in the fourteenth century experienced profound social and political upheaval brought about by six decades of civil warfare, conducted in the name of two competing royal lineages. Thomas Conlan adopts an innovative approach toward this tumultuous era, highlighting the role, not of warrior power, but of influential courtier-monks who deployed their mastery of ritual and symbolics in new strategies of legitimation that reshaped the medieval Japanese polity. Based on extensive examination of little known documents, this exciting study will be welcomed by all readers interested in religious constructions of political authority in pre-modern Japan and their influence on modern imperial discourse." -- Jacqueline Stone, Professor of Japanese Religions, Princeton University About the Author Thomas Conlan is a graduate of Stanford University and the University of Michigan, specializing in premodern Japanese history, and has taught at Bowdoin College since 1998. He has spent considerable time in Japan, where he studied at Kyoto University, and has written widely about warfare in Japan and the 1274 and 1281 Mongol Invasions.