Alongside his better known contemporary, the historian of political thought, Maruyama Masao, Ōtsuka Hisao was a scholar of Western economic history and a celebrated intellectual in post-war Japan. Ōtsuka’s works are extensive and touch on areas well beyond economic history such as issues in developing economies and the methodology of social sciences, with a particular focus on Karl Marx and Max Weber. In Japan, Ōtsuka’s methodology has become known as ‘Ōtsuka History’ (Ōtsuka Shiakku) or ‘Comparative Economic History’ (Hikaku Keizai Shigaku), and has had a significant influence on Japanese social sciences. Several of Ōtsuka’s works embrace Christianity, as he was a member of the Non-Church Movement (Mukyōkai), and was baptized by its founder Uchimura Kanzō.  

Ōtsuka enjoyed considerably less international recognition than Maruyama. Other than a short trip to Europe when he took part in the Second International Conference of Economic History in Aix-en-Provence, France, in 1962, followed by a brief visit to the
United States, Otsuka did not spend any extended periods of travel or study outside Japan. While Otsuka’s area of expertise was the history of the development of capitalism in early modern Britain, his works were scarcely known to his scholastic contemporaries in Britain. This is understandable, since most of his works were only available in the original Japanese, unlike Maruyama’s, which were translated into English and still attract considerable critical attention.

In 1982, a representative collection of Otsuka’s works was published in English. This finally enabled Otsuka’s works to become known overseas, although they did not elicit much praise from British scholars. Today, few scholars even in Japan, cite Otsuka’s work or pay him any critical attention.

From the perspective of modern research, Otsuka’s view of British history is vulnerable to negative criticism, although his research offers far more than a general overview and does much more than rehashing or restating the work of British and other Western scholars. Rather, Otsuka offers a view of Britain seen through Japanese eyes. Otsuka’s works cover a lot of ground. In this paper I focus on three areas of research.

First, Otsuka discussed the economic structure of early modern Britain in comparison with that of the Netherlands. The seventeenth century was a period of prosperity in the Netherlands and was called the ‘Golden Age’. However, the Netherlands fell into decline in the first half of the eighteenth century and in the late eighteenth century Britain overtook the Netherlands and became the first country in the world to experience the industrial revolution.

Second, Otsuka focused on the middle class rather than landlords or the gentry as the main drivers of the British economy. Thus Otsuka viewed the wealth which petty bourgeois producers created in local markets as the main driving force behind the formation of capitalism in Britain, rather than the wealth created by imperial rule, foreign trade or other financial activities.

Third, influenced by Weber, Otsuka maintained that ascetic puritanism was the spiritual factor underpinning the success of Britain’s modernization. As Otsuka saw it, the Puritan Revolution was a popular revolution in which religious conflict became entwined with conflicts of interest in political, social and economic history; along with the Glorious Revolution, the Puritan Revolution constituted one of the great watersheds in English history.

These three points are closely linked. To Otsuka, the social scientist and non-church Christian, Britain was the motherland of capitalism, modernization, democracy and Puritanism. Despite or in some ways because he never studied in Britain, Otsuka was able to develop his own theory of history and to offer a unique perspective on British history by intensive reading of secondary sources in the four foreign languages at his command: English, German, French and Dutch.