



A History of Japan: From Stone Age to Superpower

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In a rare combination of comprehensive coverage and sustained critical focus, this book examines Japanese history in its entirety to identify the factors underlying the nation's progression to superpower status. Japan's achievement is explained not merely in economic terms, but at a more fundamental level, as a product of historical patterns of response to circumstance. Japan is shown to be a nation historically impelled by a pragmatic determination to succeed. The book also highlights unresolved questions and little-known facts.

A History of Japan: From Stone Age to Superpower Details

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Chris Chester says

This was a great resource for filling in the gaps in my knowledge about Japan. In my experience, so many of the works of history available to Americans are weirdly specific to the American experience. Most focus either directly or indirectly on the Pacific War and the American occupation or else are dated looks at the Japanese business culture when they seemed like the great ascendant economic enemy in the 1980s.

So what I was really hoping to get from Henshall's book was a quick overview of the formation of the Japanese state and a more in-depth look at the Meiji restoration and how it contributed to Japanese militarism and ultimately into the post-WW2 state that I was familiar with from other readings.

I'm pleased to say that it met my expectations in this respect. I got a lot more insight into the decision to close Japan to foreigners in the first place. This was incredibly important context to have to understand the veritable explosion outward during the Meiji era, which further informed the seemingly rational decisions that led the state to confront the west militarily.

Having all this context was important too for breaking down a lot of the misinformation and propaganda that underpins Japan's myths even today. Reading about Emperor Hirohito in the American context, it's sort of taken as granted that the Japanese believed in the godlike essence of their ruler and that the monarchy was an essential part of the state going back centuries.

That turns out not to be true! The power and presence of the emperor's court has waxed and waned over the years, but really hasn't been the locus of true power in the country for millennia. The emperor has long been a figurehead, beholden at various times to military leaders or merchants or even former emperors for their titular power. And when that lie tumbles, so too do others like the idea of the noble samurai.

Henshall covers a lot of material in a relatively abbreviated amount of space, so of course there were a lot of times when I wish he would have paused and gone into greater detail. But what can you do when you're trying to fit so much into 300 pages? This is very much a textbook, all the way down to the charts at the end of chapters, listing attributes that the Japanese had acquired during specific eras and chapter summaries that I could see a younger version of myself reading in lieu of the complete text before a test. But sometimes that's all you need!

Paul Garrett says

It is good as an overview or introduction to Japan's history but, as with China, one needs to read Japanese history by periods to have an adequate understanding of Japan. Also to describe Japan as a Superpower is inaccurate. A power, yes, but never a Superpower.

Cerre says

So easy to read and to follow. Paints a very broad picture of historical events merged with some analysis. I

highly recommend reading this if you want an introduction to Japanese history.

Daniel says

O carte bun?, din care am aflat pe scurt istoria Japoniei. Mi-a pl?cut stilul concis, nepartizan, bogat în informa?ii. Rezumatele ?i tabelele de la sfâr?itul fiec?rui capitol le g?sesc foarte folositoare. Pentru mine este un exemplu de scriere a unei c?r?i de istorie într-o prezentare atr?g?toare, oferind date ?i momente definitorii pentru formarea Japoniei moderne. Stilul este unul curat, f?r? ornamente stilistice inutile, limbajul fiind accesibil unui public divers.

Întreaga carte se concentreaz? pe concluziile finale. Cumva profesorul Kenneth G. Henshall, conduce textul ca pe o intrig? poli?ist? spre unele concluzii care mi se par cel pu?in tulbur?toare. Omogenitatea japonezilor este v?zut? când ca un lucru r?u (na?ionalism, ?ovinism, rasism), când ca surs? a puterii economice actuale (prin confucianism în primul rând). Lipsa de moralitate, sau mai corect spus extrema capacitate de a închide ochii la f?r?delegi, atunci când interesele na?ionale le sunt oferite ca scuze, când este prezentat ca un lucru r?u, când ca o form? de pragmatism ce le-a permis s? ajung? o superputere.

Istoria se termin? în 1999, data apari?iei în limba englez?. Între timp Japonia a mers mai departe, criza înc? nu e complet trecut? ?i unele lucruri s-au mai îmbun?t?it (drepturile femeilor, syndicatele). Japonia r?mâne un model de succes ?i o permanent? fascina?ie pentru europeni.

Bonnie says

A good place to start if you're interested in Japanese history. The focus on 20th century history is obvious, given that it takes up more than half the book. As someone who is not a fan of 20th century history (for any country), I'm not enthused and wished he'd spent more time on earlier periods. I did like the first 70 pages, which covers up to the end of the Tokugawa Period (1868). I also liked the summarizations at the end of each chapter. If I wasn't particularly interested in a given chapter, I could just read the end summary and get all the important information there (plus, it's good for future refrence).

Also, since it's so slim, there obviously can't be too much depth into daily life of Japan and the focus is more on important names/dates/wars/trends/etc. While this is understandable, I do miss the interesting anecdotes and ability to make history "come alive" that I get from my favorite history books.

Its focus on the 20th century and its necessarily cut-and-dry text is what gives it three stars instead of four, but for what it is (a brief overview of Japanese history), it's very good. I feel like I've now got a decent foundation for future readings on Japanese history.

Michael says

Good introduction to Japanese history, great writing style. But there's some problems with it:

* I intensely dislike ascribing a "Japanese nature" to its people, which is a theme that runs throughout the book. It's certainly justifiable for modern society and probably early modern/medieval societies too, but he ascribes too much importance on it, which detracts from other legit factors. However, suggesting that the

Japanese exhibits traits right back to pre-history is especially ass-backwards and silly.

* The scope is a bit weird. About 50% of the book is on modern history, which is understandable since Ken is a modern historian. I find the modern part a bit dull, though, probably my bias.

* There are mistakes. I noticed a few in the Medieval chapter. Some are factual, others are (as far as I know) based on outdated scholarship, which makes me leery about the other chapters.

But it's only 200 pages and aimed at the general audience; what did you expect? Good for basic knowledge and introduction, perhaps not so great for serious academic work (except for maybe the modern history parts, I dunno).

Luca Frasca says

Il libro rappresenta un'ottima introduzione per chi intenda accostarsi alla storia del Giappone. Non avendo alcuna preparazione in materia, ho trovato il testo ben strutturato per acquisire un'idea di massima sulle vicende storiche del popolo del Sol Levante.

L'esteso arco storico abbracciato, dalla preistoria al mondo contemporaneo, nelle sole 300 pagine del libro è un po' sacrificato e la trattazione risulta in alcune parti sommaria, col rischio di smarrirsi tra i molteplici nomi e i continui conflitti, soprattutto in epoca feudale. Un ricca bibliografia offre in ogni caso le necessarie indicazioni per eventuali approfondimenti.

Ho utilizzato il testo come supporto per un approfondimento storico durante la lettura de "La letteratura giapponese" di Marcello Muccioli.

Liam says

"Many present-day Japanese make much of the nation's association with rice and assume it has been grown there from time immemorial, but in fact Japan was the last of the Asian nations to adopt rice cultivation." (10)

"As the country entered an enduring phase of stability and peace [Tokugawa], without even any real foreign threat, warriors became superfluous. ... Instead, they became bureaucrats and administrators. Their battles became paper wars. These men who occupied the top class in the social order were acutely embarrassed by their almost parasitic life." (59-60)

Ichoku gyokusai: the self-destruction of the jewel-like hundred million. (128)

"The soaring phoenix or the risen sun became the rudderless ship. It is indeed as though the help of the ship of state became inoperative. Some have said this is because it simply ran out of models. It no longer has some clear target that it can 'catch up and overtake.' It has no obvious channel for its national energies." (184)

Davide Tierno says

Il giusto titolo per il libro dovrebbe essere "Breve storia del Giappone". I Fino al periodo Meiji si fa un

riassunto a grandi linee degli eventi, a livelli di sussidiario di scuola elementare/media mentre il dopo-guerra e' trattato in modo didascalico, elencando una serie infinita di eventi con poco approfondimento. E' un libro scritto bene, ricco di note e credo che in fondo questo sia il suo ruolo: fornire spunti a chi realmente interessato ad approfondire la storia del Giappone...altrove.

Klaas Roggeman says

This is a reasonably good concise overview of Japanese history. It was last updated in 2012, so it doesn't say anything about the most recent years. Its summary's after each chapter and the use of tables mark it as a textbook for educational purposes. This also means that it can feel rather dry. But if you want a short factual overview, this book delivers.

J.M. Hushour says

A perfectly fine and, to me, uncontroversial, history of Japan. It is pretty concise and its strength lies in its succinctness: it'd be easy to fall into morasses and miasmas with the history of any country, but Henshall steers clear by focusing on the salient points, usually internal political development and events. But this is not without its shortcomings. Short thrift is given to Japan's international relations except where they were overly salient (like, say, WWII), and very little room is given over to any talk of the arts, film, literature, what-have-you.

But that's okay. Henshall delivers everything that you'd need and even makes some wacky sociological assertions that make you scratch your chin thoughtfully. Plus, with quotes like

"[I]t was the foreigners, who, metaphorically-speaking, had finally blown open the doors of the closed country. Western fart power had prevailed."

you can't really go wrong.

João Perdigão says

Ao contar a história do Japão, consegue explicar a mentalidade destes que criaram dois "milagres" económicos.

Acho que o livro fica mais interessante a partir da primeira guerra mundial. Até lá, a pessoa perde-se um bocado com os nomes e as situações. Mas fica sempre com uma ideia do que aconteceu.

M.J. says

Kenneth Henshall's "A History of Japan: From Stone Age to Superpower" is generally a good primer for Japanese history, mostly free of romanticism and possessing a fairly clear-eyed view of the major trends and events. However, the book is somewhat marred by a concluding chapter that appears a little too eager to promote some broad generalizations and sees excessive virtue in some of the propaganda and myth-making the author spent time cutting down.

The book is brief, coming in at under two hundred pages (and many of those pages are chapter summaries), but achieves what it needs to do in introducing key moments as the centuries pass in just a few pages. Of course, with this approach comes a lack of context and insight, leading more to a narration of events and high-level trends at play in each period. While this is a weakness of this type of book (one that can't be truly escaped), it is also an element of Henshall's strength with the overarching narrative—he is not required to play lip-service to the prevailing myths about samurai and their ethos, instead highlighting the pragmatism of the ruling elite over any idealized romanticism of the age. It also allows him to present some of the more appalling (and controversial) moments in history in an unemotional manner that largely defuses potential accusations of bias.

The writing style is generally appropriate and successfully reaches out to a broad audience that may not be well-informed on the nuances of Japan's history. This can make it seem superficial (in large part because the content is required to be superficial), but achieves its goal of having each chapter serve as an introduction to a particular period. The summaries at the end of each short chapter, however, reinforce the feeling that it is a text designed for a high school class.

If I could cut one aspect of the book, it would be the concluding chapter. In this opinion piece summing up his preferred themes taken from centuries of Japanese history, Henshall seems to buy into the myth of Japanese homogeneity and the virtues of nationalism—elements he himself seemed to provide warnings against in earlier chapters. At other points in the book, this tendency towards a narrow focus seemed more in the service of the condensed narrative (creating a Japanese history rather than Japanese histories), but free of the need to narrate events this actually became more exaggerated. It added little to the book, and, in fact, took away from my enjoyment of it as I found it troubling.

Overall the book provides the broad sweep of history, but can only be considered a sampler at best. Read the chapters to introduce yourself to the topics for areas that might interest you further (and skip the conclusion entirely).

Xarah says

Review of third edition, rather than the second.

I found this book to be short, sweet, and full of a lot of interesting information. I knew very little about Japan's history and this book provided a concise summary. I think, after reading this, I may be able to better understand some of the Japanese novels I read a little more fully.

Melissa says

3.5 Stars

A bit dated considering the book came out in 1999, and the book focuses mostly on the past century though it does give a break down of what we know of Japan's history from ancient to modern times. A good starter book for Japanese history, but for more information you would have to find more sources.
