

Routledge Handbook of Japanese Culture and Society. Edited by Victoria Lyon Bestor,
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The editors here present a series of essays on Japanese society which provide a broad spectrum approach including topics as far apart as political history and modern anime fandom. Such a multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary approach has both strengths and weaknesses, favoring inclusiveness over specificity, but the good points overwhelmingly compensate for the bad. The editors set for themselves the goal of producing “an interdisciplinary reference work for a broad international audience ...— university-level readers, professionals, and the general reading public seeking accurate information and thoughtful perspectives” (1). In that regard they have spectacularly succeeded.

The focus of the volume is on modern Japan, but it contains historical elements to situate the changes experienced during the mid-Showa era as Japan adjusted from a war footing to a semi-Westernized nation-state. A few essays even go back to the late Tokugawa period in order to establish precedent and context (1). The collection is thus of value to virtually any social scientist interested in Japan and East Asia in general.

The first group of chapters focuses on the social foundations of the nation, beginning with Peter Duus’ analysis of the shift experience in Japan following WWII, while paying close attention to the interplay of continuity and change even if “the historical continuities across the divide of defeat have become clearer, and the contrasts more muted” effectively creating a Japanese *longue durée* (13). Possibly the single biggest change, especially in terms of social research, was the shift from print to electronic media, especially after the wedding of then-Crown

Prince Akihito to his bride Shōda Michiko in 1959 and the ready availability of television sets due to the Japanese equivalent of the *Wirtschaftswunder* (20 and 24). The section quickly moves on to political culture, especially the language choices involved in the Japanese system of governance. Of particular note is Nanette Gottlieb's adroit and direct analysis as she takes to task the habit of obfuscation in Japanese political culture, which tends to circumlocute to the point of absurdity. This includes efforts to insist that Japan is the "only country in the world having 'one nation, one civilization, one language, one culture, and one race'" (43, quoting former Internal Affairs and Communications Minister Asō Tarō's 2005 statement). Contrariwise, popular culture developments, especially with cell phone texting and email, have encoded the Japanese language in another way because "computer-mediated communication in general can bear little resemblance to that found in handwritten letters or in printed Japanese. Eccentric spelling, non-standard use of orthography (often intended to achieve different phonetic effects), abbreviation and code-like subcultural texting practices have become prominent features" (45). This means that official and popular cultures are effectively speaking two very different languages. This phenomenon is similarly addressed by Roger Goodman when he writes that "great efforts were made to minimize regional and rural/urban diversity" in schooling patterns (53). Such attempts to enforce linguistic uniformity trample on the natural inventiveness of a living language and can produce difficulties for students expected to meet the minimum standards of kanji knowledge. The few reforms initiated with the intent of coping with a new generation have met serious criticism, and the "Japanese Ministry of Education was forced to backtrack considerably, insisting, for example, that the new curriculum requirements were minimal rather than maximal" (60). As such, the diversity of the Japanese language, seen as a weakness in the nation's

educational structure, may be severely limited in the future by an entrenched governmental and publishing infrastructure insisting on the old ways.

The chapter on religion by Mark Mullins admits at the start that “there is no consensus in either scholarly or popular discourse on the meaning and use of the concept of ‘religion’ (shūkyō)” (63). Religion thus becomes associated almost entirely with organized religion or institutional religion, leading most Japanese to identify as nonreligious (mushūkyō). Despite this, many in Japan still participate in rites and festivals that, to a Westerner, look like religious exercises. Indeed, the nation adopts essentially a mixture of Shinto practice for this-worldly concerns and Buddhist beliefs for other-worldly questions (64). It is best, or at least most accurate, to examine the question in terms of revealed versus “natural” faiths (66). That is, religions in the Japanese understanding have definite founders, doctrines, and belief systems, while natural faiths do not. Indeed, “without claiming to belong to one particular religion, Japanese ‘naturally’ participate in annual events, household rituals related to the ancestors, rites of passage, and festivals” (67). Given the dichotomy, this author highlights the very real need to come up with new terminology to describe exactly what is going on in the Japanese religious universe.

The next group of chapters focuses on class, identity, and status. In the Western mind, Japanese culture is often thought of as repressive and dismissive of women and their contributions to society, and the term “queer” and other identity groups are so often ignored outside Western settings. Robin M. LeBlanc examines the gender quandary from both sides of the lens and presents an interesting reformulation of how Japanese society has evolved to cope with new gendered realities. Drawing partly from her own experience and partly from intensive studies, LeBlanc insists that the position of women in Japan is far more nuanced than is normally

believed in the West (116). Indeed, “gendering in social, economic, and political institutions persists even while the specific content of gendered role expectations is debated and refashioned by a public and a political system that are arguably hyper-conscious of both the social meaning of gender difference” and how the West will perceive it (117). In official culture, women are expected to be “good wives and wise mothers,” though, for unknown reasons, LeBlanc does not include that this expression derives from a WWII-era nationalist slogan (117). The system actually constrains men just as much as women and has similar consequences for those who do not fit in (118). That said, the number of those who ascribe to those gender norms is decreasing year by year as indicated by demographic data (120). More directly, Mark McLelland’s chapter on queer culture specifically examines the performativity of masculinity and femininity as an intentionally constructed phenomenon. Indeed, it is entirely possible that “queer” and other such categories are entirely inapplicable to pre-modern Japan because “during the Edo period (1603–1868) there was no normative connection made between gender and sexual preference because all men, whether samurai, priest, or commoner, were able to engage in both same- and opposite-sex affairs” with interactions usually involving an upper class male on the one hand and either a boy (*shudō*) or a transsexual actor on the other (140). Contrariwise, there was no widely used term to express female same-sex relationships until the 1920s. However, sexuality of all sorts was repressed in the militarist period and replaced with “homosocial brotherhood,” and clandestine homosexual relationships continued in the ranks. Indeed, it was thought of as a natural consequence of sex segregation (142). More recently, *okama* identity, which may be best represented as “bottom” identification in Western queer culture, has become a political consideration with a formulation of the Miscellaneous (i.e.: Gender Non-Specific) People’s Party in 1971 (145). Eventually, transgender storylines would even become commonplace on Tokyo

Broadcasting System programs from 2001 onward, with the network's website encouraging viewers to read up on the topic in a neutral fashion. McLelland delicately avoids comparison with the West in the post-WWII comments. However, his silence is in some ways more scathing than any words might have been.

Richard Siddle and Carolyn S. Stevens in their respective chapters consider a darker side of Japanese culture, namely, how those regarded as outsiders or foreigners are perceived and treated. Such concerns range from an informal continuation of the segregation of untouchables to denying citizenship to ethnic Koreans born in Japan whose families have lived in the archipelago for generations. Siddle aptly demonstrates the Japanese internalization of Western concepts of race and racism in the late nineteenth century and how it had similar consequences (151). Like the West, Japan invoked rationales for its race policies as various as economic necessity and mystical connections to destiny. The examination of *Burakumin*, Japanese untouchables, and how they are treated is particularly apt. Their concerns are euphemistically addressed as an "assimilation issue (*dōwa mondai*)" in official culture, in another example of the linguistic avoidance for which Japanese politics is infamous (153). Ainu, Okinawans, and Korean-descended residents face similar forms of discrimination. Indeed, Japan has made it nearly impossible for those whose families have been in Japan for generations to acquire citizenship, while granting an easy entry for citizenship for those descended from Japanese who went abroad looking for work (158). Siddle thus demonstrates the ongoing nature of race relations in Japan, and they are both discriminatory and dishonest. Stevens looks at other outsider groups, mainly the homeless and migrant laborers. Such people gather daily at known pickup spots for day labor, known as *yosebas* (163). Again, the subculture has developed its own language use in a way which official culture ignores or denies, and the future of such groups is in doubt precisely

because the official policy is to pretend they do not exist. Stevens' assessment of the situation in many ways parallels the situation in the United States, especially the recent furor over Arizona's SB 1070.

The final section, entitled "Cool Japan," looks at the avant-garde in Japan. While a very serious subject, as clearly demonstrated in William H. Coaldrake's chapter on architecture or Ian Condry's on popular music, such examinations can be shallow at times. One such instance is in Susan Napier's chapter on anime and manga; though she does an excellent job of tracing cinema history in Japan, and her work is always insightful in that regard, she is dismissive of the fandom and has admitted elsewhere that she only studies them because it has become hip to do so. As such, it is difficult to take seriously her comments on fan groups. She mistakenly claims that "most Japanese under 50" read manga (229). This is only true if one includes news broadsides and technical literature in the definition, a point most readers would strenuously contest. Further, her assertion that series like *Neon Genesis Evangelion* possess "fan-boy pleasing sexuality" is highly questionable when one considers that the only overt sexuality is of a pubescent boy, Ikari Shinji, masturbating over the unconscious form of his fellow *mecha* pilot, Asuka Langley Soryu. Ikari's relationship with the other pilot, Ayanami Rei, is similarly complicated because she is actually a clone of the boy's dead mother. Though it is possible that a few "fan-boys" enjoy that sort of presentation, and the work is both popularly and critically acclaimed, most fans and critics attempt to avoid comment on those portions of the narrative. Napier has, once again, demonstrated that she is thoroughly disconnected from the social group she intends to study.

The book lacks a conclusion to tie all the strands of Japanese culture together in a final presentation. The "Cool Japan" section is poorly connected to the rest of the collection, and a concluding chapter from the editors could have made this tie more explicit. The first two sections

provide an insightful, well-organized and integrated look at Japanese culture. The third section, with the exception of Napier's chapter, is an excellent and intriguing look at popular culture in ways not normally examined in Japanese studies. Overall, the editors chose well, and this volume would make an excellent addition to any library's catalogue.

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