

The Japanese Consumer: an Alternative Economic History of Modern Japan

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The Japanese Consumer claims to be an alternative economic history of modern Japan. I don't think it is. It is an account of the place of consumption in the everyday life of the Japanese population, drawn largely from a rich scholarship that has become available in English during the last two decades. Japan specialists will most probably be familiar with the studies Francks utilized in this publication. For scholars unfamiliar with scholarship on Japan, however, and for the popular reader in particular, this book will definitely prove very refreshing, providing a thorough and informative overview of the development of Japanese consumption practices from early-modern times to the present. Does it contribute to the field, open up new grounds, offer interesting research possibilities? I dare say it does not. A major contribution of this volume is in neatly summarizing existing scholarship, which will prove useful in undergraduate teaching.

The Japanese Consumer is structured chronologically. The two chapters that follow the introduction set the stage for the book by describing the world of consumption in Japan before the influx of technologies, goods and fashions from the West. Chapter two portrays the commercial culture of the great cities, with the particular focus on the city of Edo (present-day Tokyo), while chapter three depicts frugal life in the countryside. The main sources for these two chapters include the multi-volume classic *Cambridge History of Japan* and acclaimed monographs such as *Servants, Shophands and Laborers in the Cities of Tokugawa Japan*, *Edo and Paris* and *Everyday Things in Premodern Japan*.⁽¹⁾

Recycling secondary literature in English remains a prevailing pattern in the following four chapters. For example, Jansen and Rozman's edited volume *Japan in Transition* ⁽²⁾ and Edward Seidensticker's *Low City, High City*

(3) serve this purpose in chapter four, which describes the beginnings of Western borrowings in the name of the ‘civilization and enlightenment’ policy of the Meiji government (1868–1912) striving to modernize the economy and society. Chapter five deals with the emergent consumer of the inter-war years and the rise of institutions that would come to define Japanese consumption practices for decades, such as the department store, multicultural urban gastronomy, and the middle-class home. These themes have received increasing scholarly attention since the late 1990s, with publications such as Macpherson’s *Asian Department Stores* (4), Tipton and Clark’s *Being Modern in Japan* (5), Sand’s *House and Home in Modern Japan* (6), and Cwierka’s *Modern Japanese Cuisine*. (7) Francks draws extensively on these works. In chapter six she deals with the wartime years of austerity and the post-war economic miracle, focusing on the electrification of the Japanese home, a central theme in Simon Partner’s *Assembled in Japan* (8), which she also prominently utilizes. Finally, chapter seven, the last one before the conclusion, picks up on themes covered by the contributors to Joseph Tobin’s edited volume *Re-made in Japan*. (9)

The bulk of arguments presented in *The Japanese Consumer*, had been made by scholars years earlier, in monographs that are still in print today, and had been written based on original research conducted by their authors. Penelope Francks has very neatly organized this work into her book, for which she definitely deserves praise. The volume reads very well and without a doubt will contribute to the spread of knowledge about consumption practices in Japan outside the field of Japanese Studies.

What I personally find disturbing in *The Japanese Consumer* is the author’s lack of respect towards the pioneer scholars (chiefly sociologists and anthropologists, but also including historians) who since the 1990s have undertaken original research into consumption in Japan. ‘[The] consumers they study appear timelessly modern, or post-modern’, Francks states bluntly, ‘divorced from any of the historical economic, social or political processes that might have made them what they are today’ (p. 3). This remark is not only untrue – most of the scholars concerned have been fully aware of historical connections – but also unfair. It is largely owing to the groundbreaking work of pioneers, who since the 1990s have struggled to put consumption on the map, that this body of research has grown and the field matured in recent years. As Inge Daniels writes in a 1999 review article in *Journal of Material Culture*, the scholarship on Japanese consumption that emerged at the time was of high quality and rather unusual within consumption studies in general as ‘outstanding pieces of work focused ... on one particular region’. (10) These pioneering studies in consumption challenged stereotypical images of Japan and contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of Japanese modernity within the global context of consumption.

At the core of the growing interest in consumption during the 1990s was the ConsumAsiaN network set up by Brian Moeran and Lise Skov with the aim of propagating the inter-disciplinary study of consumption throughout Asia. Although the network itself did not survive the test of time, the volumes published in the Asia ConsumAsiaN book series, launched as part of the network, greatly contributed to the growth of research on consumption in Japan and Asia more broadly.

The very first book in the series, *Women, Media and Consumption in Japan* (11), edited by Moeran and Skov, to the present day remains a seminal work for studying the connection between consumerism and the media in Japan, with particular reference to women. The volume pinpoints the contradictory nature of the relationship between Japanese women and consumerism that had evolved by the end of the 20th century. While consumption constitutes an important element of female agency as women construct statements of self and social positioning, at the same time their individual freedom is constrained by the fantasies of ideal life generated through engagement with media and consumerism. The promise of individualism projected through consumer marketing has a paradoxical connotation in a society that exerts strong pressures toward conformity.

This point is stressed by Merry White and John Clammer, the authors of two leading monographs on consumption in Japan published in the 1990s who also contributed chapters to Moeran and Skov’s volume. In *The Material Child* (12) – a cross-cultural study of Japanese and American teenagers – White demonstrated how severely the demands for conformity and performance perfection in the realm of consumerism can be experienced by teens in Japan. Clammer, in turn, argues in *Contemporary Urban Japan: Sociology of Consumption*

(13) that although generally speaking variety and originality are devalued in Japanese consumer culture relative to newness or up-to-date-ness, homogeneity prevails alongside differentiations that develop between each segment of the consumer market. The most recent publication on the topic, *Japanese Consumer Dynamics* (2011), explores these differentiations further by devoting the second part of the volume to specific consumer groups: the elderly, single people, the ‘new rich’, young males, and the *otaku* consumers.

Following the publication of *Women, Media and Consumption in Japan*, the ConsumAsian book series released two less successful monographs focusing on consumption, *Packaged Japanese-ness: Weddings, Business, and Brides* by Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni and *Japanese Consumer Behaviour: from Worker Bees to Wary Shoppers* by John McCreery.(14) Despite the drawbacks in the analysis, these two studies greatly contributed to the field by documenting the details of the Japanese consumer behavior of the 1980s and 1990s. Two other volumes in the series, *Asian Department Stores* and *Asia Food: The Global and the Local* pioneered the exploration of topics of retailing and food consumption hitherto neglected in the study of Japan and Asia.(15)

A noteworthy shift in the study of Japanese consumption took place after the turn of the 21st century. Rather than addressing consumption practices in general, monographs focusing on particular aspects of them became prominent. For example, Waswo’s *Housing In Postwar Japan: a Social History* and *The Japanese House: Material Culture of the Modern Home* (16), along with *House and Home in Modern Japan* and *Assembled in Japan* (both mentioned above), collectively provide an excellent picture of the changing consumption practices behind the closed doors of the Japanese homes. As far as clothing/fashion is concerned, ten years following the publication of McVeigh’s *Wearing Ideology* (17), a true explosion of research into Japanese fashion took place, concurrent with the rising of global interest in the phenomenon of street fashion – a creative consumption of clothing by Japanese youth. *Japanese Fashion: a Cultural History*, *Japanese Fashion Now*, along with the forthcoming *Fabricating Consumers: the Sewing Machine in Modern Japan* by Gordon and Kawamura’s *Fashioning Japanese Subcultures*, reveal the dynamic relationship between clothing, history and culture.(18)

The study of Japanese food culture also experienced tremendous growth during the last decade. The very first monograph in English related to Japanese food was Ohnuki-Tierney’s *Rice as Self: Japanese Identities through Time*, and the second one – *The Essence of Japanese Cuisine*, co-authored by Ashkenazi and Jacob – followed only five years later.(19) After the turn of the twenty-first century, however, a genuine boost took place, with Ishige’s *The History and Culture of Japanese Food*, Bestor’s *Tsukiji: the Fish Market at the Center of the World*, Cwiertka’s *Modern Japanese Cuisine*, Rath’s *Food and Fantasy in Early Modern Japan*, Rath and Assmann’s edited volume *Japanese Foodways Past and Present*, and a number of forthcoming publications.(20)

The study of Japanese consumption is thriving at the moment, largely due to the pioneering spirit of authors who took up the topic during the last two decades. The limited scope of this review did not make it possible to include articles on Japanese consumption that have appeared over the years in a variety of academic journals. Nonetheless, I hope to have been able convincingly to demonstrate, using examples of monographs and edited volumes, that *The Japanese Consumer* by Penelope Francks should not be viewed as addressing a neglected topic, but instead be regarded as a very useful summary of the rich body of scholarship on Japanese consumption.

Notes

1. *The Cambridge History of Japan, Vol. 4: Early Modern Japan*, ed. John Whitney Hall and [James L. McClain](#) [2] (Cambridge, 1991); *The Cambridge History of Japan, Vol. 5: the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Marius B. [Jansen](#) [3] (Cambridge, 1989); Gary P. Leupp, *Servants, Shophands and Laborers in the Cities of Tokugawa Japan* (Princeton, NJ, 1992); Susan Hanley, *Everyday Things in Premodern Japan* (Berkeley, CA, 1997); *Edo and Paris: Urban Life and the State in the Early Modern Era*, ed. James L.

- McClain et al. (Ithaca, NY, 1994).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Japan in Transition: From Tokugawa to Meiji*, ed. Marius B. Jansen and Gilbert Rozman (Princeton, NJ, 1986).[Back to \(2\)](#)
 3. Edward Seidensticker, *Low City, High City: Tokyo from Edo to the Earthquake* (London, 1983).[Back to \(3\)](#)
 4. *Asian Department Stores*, ed. Kerrie L. McPherson (Richmond, 1998).[Back to \(4\)](#)
 5. *Being Modern in Japan: Culture and Society from the 1910s to the 1930s*, ed. Elise K. Tipton and John Clark (Honolulu, HI, 2000).[Back to \(5\)](#)
 6. Jordan Sand, *House and Home in Modern Japan* (Cambridge, 2003).[Back to \(6\)](#)
 7. Katarzyna J. Cwiertka, *Modern Japanese Cuisine* (London, 2006).[Back to \(7\)](#)
 8. Simon Partner, *Assembled in Japan: Electrical Goods and the Making of the Japanese Consumer* (Berkeley, CA, 1999).[Back to \(8\)](#)
 9. Joseph Tobin, *Re-made in Japan: Everyday life and Consumer Taste in a Changing Society* (New Haven, CT, 1992).[Back to \(9\)](#)
 10. Inge Daniels, 'Japanese material culture and consumerism', *Journal of Material Culture*, 4, 2 (1999), 231–40, at p. 239.[Back to \(10\)](#)
 11. *Women, Media and Consumption in Japan*, ed. Brian Moeran and Lise Skov (Richmond, 1995).[Back to \(11\)](#)
 12. Merry White, *The Material Child: Coming of Age in Japan and America* (Berkeley, CA, 1994).[Back to \(12\)](#)
 13. John Clammer, *Contemporary Urban Japan: a Sociology of Consumption* (Oxford, 1997).[Back to \(13\)](#)
 14. Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni, *Packaged Japaneseness: Weddings, Business, and Brides* (Richmond, 1997); John McCreery, *Japanese Consumer Behaviour: from Worker Bees to Wary Shoppers* (Richmond, 2000).[Back to \(14\)](#)
 15. *Asian Food: The Global and the Local*, ed. Katarzyna Cwiertka with B. C. A. Walraven (Richmond, 2001).[Back to \(15\)](#)
 16. Ann Waswo, *Housing in Postwar Japan* (Richmond, 2001); *The Japanese House: Material Culture of the Modern Home* (Richmond, 2010).[Back to \(16\)](#)
 17. Brian J. McVeigh, *Wearing Ideology: State, Schooling and Self-Presentation in Japan* (Oxford, 2000).[Back to \(17\)](#)
 18. Yuniya Kawamura, *Fashioning Japanese Subcultures* (Oxford, forthcoming); Toby Slade, *Japanese Fashion: a Cultural History* (Oxford, 2010); Valerie Steele et al., *Japanese Fashion Now* (New Haven, CT, 2010); Andrew Gordon, *Fabricating Consumers: the Sewing Machine in Modern Japan* (Berkeley, CA, forthcoming).[Back to \(18\)](#)
 19. Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, *Rice as Self: Japanese Identities through Time* (Princeton, NJ, 1993); Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney and Jeanne Jacob, *The Essence of Japanese Cuisine* (Philadelphia, PA, 1998).[Back to \(19\)](#)
 20. Naomichi Ishige, *The History and Culture of Japanese Food* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2001); Theodor C. Bestor, *Tsukiji: the Fish Market at the Center of the World* (Berkeley, CA, 2004); Katarzyna J. Cwiertka, *Modern Japanese Cuisine* (London, 2006); Eric C. Rath, *Food and Fantasy in Early Modern Japan* (Berkeley, CA, 2010); *Japanese Foodways Past and Present*, ed. Eric C. Rath and Stephanie Assmann (Champaign, IL, 2010).[Back to \(20\)](#)

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[3]

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