

A History of Japan, 1582-1941: Internal and External Worlds

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There are several novel things about this book that make it worth reading. The first one relates to the author. Unlike most other historians of Japan, who come from the areas of Japanese or East Asian studies, the author of this book arrives from an unexpected field. L. M. Cullen is Professor of modern Irish history at Trinity College, Dublin, and a scholar of early modern trade. An acquaintanceship with a Japanese scholar (Matsuo Taro) in Dublin and two more years at Hosei University and the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in Kyoto turned the expert in Irish history, in a remarkably short time, into an expert in Japanese history. In this book the author demonstrates a proficiency in the Japanese language, a familiarity with the Japanese sources, a mastery of the historical details, and a grasp of the voluminous scholarship on this subject in the west and Japan. His knowledge of western history and the history of trade enables him to look at Japanese history in a new and fresh way.

The second novelty is the periodization. We are accustomed to the classical division of Japanese history into pre-modern and modern eras, with the dividing line being the opening of Japan in 1854 or the Meiji Restoration of 1868. In the sub-division of those eras, we have been taught that the last age of pre-modern Japan was the Tokugawa period, which started with the battle of Sekigahara in 1600 and ended with the fall of the shogunate in 1868; while the first era of modern Japan was the imperial period, which ended with the defeat of 1945. Instead of that conventional periodization, we are presented here with a 360-year story that starts in 1582 (the rise of Hideyoshi) and ends in 1941 (the attack on Pearl Harbor). This forces us to rethink the premodern and modern history of Japan in a new paradigm as a continuum.[\(1\)](#)

The third novelty lies in the book's approach. Most history books of Japan focus on personalities, ideas, perceptions, and political differences. This book focuses on economic and political interests, multilateral

interactions, and strategies of survival. Social developments are explained in terms of trade, growth, and administrative changes. The protagonists of this book are neither the great individuals of classical historiography, nor the feuding classes of Marxist historiography, but rather the interest groups that acted and reacted in complex national and international systems. The decisions of the policy makers are judged by their effectiveness to promote their group interests.

After an introductory first chapter, Chapter 2 ('Japan and its Chinese and European worlds, 1582-1689') discusses foreign trade in East Asia in the seventeenth century. It shows that unlike the situation in Europe, Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean, where international trade implied a vast exchange of voluminous goods, foreign trade in East Asia was restricted to the exchange of high-value goods (like silk and silver) carried on a small number of large ships. As international trade was of less importance in East Asia than in the west, the international traders there were viewed with suspicion, and the governments tended to impose controls on the conduct of trade. The author claims that the closure of Japan in the sixteen-thirties (he refers to it as '*sakoku*', although the term was coined only in the nineteenth century) was not a sharp change, as portrayed in the standard textbooks, but rather a refinement of previous controls. The exclusion of the Portuguese and the confinement of the Chinese and the Dutch traders to the port of Nagasaki were motivated by a wish to preserve the balance between shogun and daimyo, more than by the fear of Christianity

Chapter 3 ('The Japanese economy, 1688-1789') describes the phenomenal economic growth of Japan in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It dismisses the theory that the eighteenth century was a period of stagnation, and asserts that despite the fall in foreign trade and a few harvest failures, the economy continued to grow. Edo became a huge consumption centre for shogun and daimyo, Osaka turned into a great marketing and finance centre, and Japan's coastal trade was the largest in the world. Chapter 4 ('An age of stability: Japan's internal world, 1709-1783, in perspective') describes the eighteenth century as an era of unprecedented security and stability, when threats of foreign invasions (European or Chinese) and internal turmoil finally disappeared. This eased the way for the authorities to seek and acquire European ('Dutch') knowledge to promote their interests.

Chapter 5 ('Prosperity and crises, 1789-1853') discusses the economic problems of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the ways in which the shogunal and daimyo authorities grappled with them. Far from proving the ineptitude of the national and local governments to handle the situation, as some historians have argued, the author regards the measures that were taken as wise responses, given the fiscal and administrative constraints of that time. In a clearly different approach from the old regimes of Europe, which tried to solve similar problems by increasing taxation and indebtedness, the Japanese acted in a clever way by cutting expenditures. Chapter 6 ('Sakoku under pressure: the gaiatsu of the 1850s and 1860s') shows the rationality with which the shogunate responded to the growing military threat of the west in the mid-nineteenth century. Contrary to the conventional image of an inefficient and irresponsible government that failed to lead Japan in the right way, the author maintains that under the difficult internal and external circumstances the government acted remarkably well. It possessed a realistic perception of the threat, it achieved a degree of national consensus, and it managed to ward off the foreign peril in exchange for modest concessions.

The last two chapters are devoted to modern Japan. Chapter 7 ('Fashioning a state and a foreign policy: Japan 1868-1919') shows how the Meiji government became convinced that westernization was the only way to preserve independence and achieve strength and prosperity. According to Cullen, the Meiji reforms were not reactionary or oppressive measures, as left-wing historians claim, but rather rational and pragmatic responses. They neutralized opposition, freed productive forces, and mobilized resources for development. In the international arena they obtained western support, making Japan into a strong and modern state that could defeat China and Russia within one decade. Chapter 8 ('From peace [Versailles 1919] to war [Pearl Harbor 1941]') differs from the others. The positive and optimistic picture of the Tokugawa and early Meiji regimes turns here into a negative and pessimistic view of Japan in the twentieth century. The rationality, which had characterized the Japanese governments from the early seventeenth century, broke down in the nineteen-thirties, leading the country into a disastrous war and foreign occupation. The author does not stop in 1941, but discusses in brief the postwar governments, which in his view have been characterised by an

amalgam of rational and irrational elements.

This is a thought-provoking book, providing interesting information and interpretation, but it also invites criticism of both its assumptions and conclusions. The first element that can be questioned is the periodization. Granted that any division of history into rigid periods is arbitrary, the adoption of a new division requires persuasion. Why start *A History of Japan* in 1582 and end it in 1941? When Toyotomi Hideyoshi assumed power in central Japan after the assassination of Oda Nobunaga in 1582, the country was still in the throes of internal war. It was only in 1590 that Japan was unified under Hideyoshi, and only in 1600 that Tokugawa Ieyasu defeated his opponents and established the long rule of his family. Starting the pre-modern (or some would say modern) history of Japan in 1600 may look old-fashioned, but it is more sensible than starting it in 1582. Ending the story in 1941 is even more questionable. In that year Japan had already been at war (with China) for four years and the attack on Pearl Harbor was a culmination of the policy of expansionism that had been developing for at least a decade. The end of this process occurred in 1945, when the whole militaristic and imperialistic structure collapsed, and not in 1941, when it embarked on its final stage.

The sub-division of this period, as proposed in the titles of the chapters, raises similar questions. One wonders why the chapter on 'The Japanese economy' carries the dates 1688-1789. Nothing special happened in 1688, except for the change of the era name from Jōkyō (which lasted for four years) to Genroku (which lasted for six years), and nothing special happened in 1789, except for the suppression of an Ainu rebellion in the far north and the change of the era name from Temmei (which lasted for eight years) to Kansei (which lasted for fifteen years). These two dates make more sense in Europe – where they stand for the Glorious Revolution and the French Revolution – than in Japan.

A more problematic feature is the use of the dichotomy of rationality and irrationality, sometimes phrased as pragmatism and recklessness, or realism and adventurism. These attributes rest on hindsight. Everything that succeeds is ultimately praised as far-sighted, rational, pragmatic and realistic. Everything that fails is ultimately condemned as short-sighted, irrational and unrealistic. Was Ieyasu's policy of inward orientation more rational than Hideyoshi's policy of external expansion? Yes, because we know the outcome, but no if we look at the personalities of these two leaders, both of whom were highly pragmatic. Was '*sakoku*' more rational than the continuation of openness to the outside world, as the author claims? Yes, because we know the positive outcome, but no if we think about the risks that self-isolation involved. The author's assertion that '[R]ealism was one of Japan's strengths from the 1850s onwards; abandonment of realism was the country's later undoing in the 1930s' (p. 13) is historically problematic, because the people who make the decisions never know the outcome. There were many moves before the 1930s (like the decision to attack Russia in 1904), which might have ended in disaster and there were later initiatives (like the negotiations with the United States in 1941 about a new status quo in southeast Asia) that might have ended in success.

The book's strength lies in the panoramic view that it presents, but its weakness lies in sweeping and dubious generalisations that this approach produces. It is difficult to agree with the author that 'Japanese history poses greater problems of interpretation than the history of other countries'. (p. 17) It seems highly exaggerated to say that 'in some respects, up to 1945 Japan had remained the *bakufu* [shogunal government] that it had still been under Meiji: a wide range of groups existed whose interests never fully converged' (p. 279), just as it seems greatly overstated that 'in a sense, Japan's place in the world has never been settled since 1868'. (p. 282) These generalisations obscure the historical picture of Japan more than they enlighten it.

The author does not regard culture as an important element in history. Although the book carries the title of *A History of Japan* and spans a period of three-and-a-half centuries, it hardly refers to cultural subjects. The great artistic and literary achievements of the Tokugawa era, like woodblock prints, haiku poetry, urban novels, or kabuki drama are absent or hardly mentioned. The names of twentieth-century thinkers, writers, poets, and artists like Uchimura Kanzo, Natsume Soseki, Mori Ogai, Yosano Akiko, Tanizaki Jun'ichiro, Nishida Kitaro, and Mizoguchi Kenji, who influenced millions of prewar Japanese, are absent.

The author criticizes the western historians of Japan, like John W. Hall and Marius B. Jansen, for

emphasizing personalities. These historians, in his words, ‘concentrated on men rather than systems.’(p. 285) They neglected ‘broad studies of socio-economic change’ (ibid.), and ‘remained fixated on personality and motivation’.(p. 287) He accuses them of narrow-mindedness, looking at Japan without taking into account the broader picture of world history: ‘In some ways all historical scholarship of Japan is isolated, cut off from historical studies at large’.(p. 287) Like Edward Said, he accuses them of serving the imperialistic interests of their states: ‘Western historiography remains prisoner of the attitudes which drove western policy in the 1850s towards seeking to prise Japan open’.(p. 288) These statements do an injustice to the broad-minded and profound scholarly work of Hall, Jansen and many other western historians.

At the end of the book, the author tries to draw lessons from Japan’s history, or as he puts it: ‘What lessons does Japan’s history, as outlined in this book, offer that may be relevant to the country’s future?’.(p. 278) It is doubtful whether a history book should present lessons from the past. Such lessons are usually anachronistic and patronising. Cullen’s main lesson is that Japan performs well under pressure, as evidenced in the early seventeenth century, the mid-nineteenth century, and the mid-twentieth century. The conclusion is that only foreign pressure (‘gaiatsu’) can extricate Japan from its present economic predicament: ‘only a sense of threat, wider than the real but diffuse public unease of the present days, could harness Japanese energies, and entail reform’.(p. 291) This is a simplistic and anachronistic lesson, assuming that ‘Japan’ has a personality of its own which does not change. It is also patronising, treating Japan as a child who would not move unless forced to do so by a mature adult, like the ‘West’.

Another lesson is that political weakness breeds disaster. The author thinks that Japan’s ‘drift into war’ was the result of weak leaders and the instability of the prewar cabinets.(p. 279) This explanation is not convincing, as one could easily argue the opposite. Usually it is the strong, and not the weak, governments that initiate war [and not the weak ones]. The Tojo cabinet which launched the war against the United States and Great Britain in 1941 was weak in fascist or communist terms, but it was the strongest cabinet that Japan had had in the twentieth century.

In his conclusions, the author tends to moralise about the past. He accuses the Japanese leaders at the beginning of the twentieth century of missing ‘the opportunity to take the moral leadership of East Asia’, and of pursuing ‘a policy of opportunism and narrow considerations’.(p. 279) This is a strange accusation from a historian who claims that interests rather than ideals guide nations. One wonders which other nation ever based its policies on moral principles and eschewed opportunism and narrow considerations. It was indeed ironic that when Japan thought that it was taking a moral stand, that of liberating Asia from western colonialism in the Second World War, it committed the greatest acts of aggression and the grossest atrocities.

The author finds fault with the present leaders of Japan who, unlike the wise leaders of the past or the (presumably) clever leaders in other countries, are too weak and too dependent on their parties and voters: ‘Japanese senior politicians spend far more time, as even the most casual listening to television news bulletins shows, in conclave with party members than do their colleagues in other industrial countries.’(p. 291) Even more astonishing, in Japan various branches of government compete with each other instead of minding collectively the common good: ‘Ministries too, even at bureaucratic level, are much more independent fiefdoms than in the West’.(ibid.) It is highly doubtful whether these characteristics of Japan are unique and whether the situation in the ‘west’ (United States? France? Italy?) is that different. In more ways than one, the book would have benefited from sticking to the past and not judging the present.

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Notes

1. The abolition of the sharp division between Tokugawa and modern Japan was achieved earlier by Marius B. Jansen in his final book, *The Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), which starts in 1600 and ends in 2000.[Back to \(1\)](#)

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