H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Benson, Takao Matsumura. *Japan, 1868-1945: From Isolation to Occupation.* Harlow: Longman, 2001. ix + 270 pp. $19.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-30813-8.

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Published on H-Japan (May, 2003)

A Good Book for the Beginner

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There are a number of general introductions to Japanese history already on the market designed to meet the needs of undergraduate students, and as I reviewed this book, my first thought was why the authors felt that another such work was needed. On reading the introductory chapter, however, it became apparent that John Benson and Takao Matsumura felt that there was call for a general history of this turbulent period in Japan that challenged the commonly held belief that the country was in some way special. As they explain in their introduction, Japan transformed itself from a rural backwater to a modern industrial economy in the period from 1868 to 1945. This transformation is often portrayed, according to the authors, as having little of the social and cultural dislocation that accompanied similar changes in other parts of the world.

Benson and Matsumura suggest, however, that considerable dislocation did occur in Japan. They therefore pose a number of questions about Japanese society during this period and comment on the factors that may have aided Japan's development. Benson and Matsumura also point out the tendency in the West, among both experts and non-experts, to take the little that is known about Japan and to transmogrify this into a set of widely known and widely accepted cliches and stereotypes. They hope that the pairing of a Japanese and a British author in this new volume will result in a work that will persuade the reader of the truth of the following three propositions.

First, Benson and Matsumura propose that while some aspects of Japanese society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries may have been unique, Japan was in no way, as the authors put it, "unique in her uniqueness" (p. 9). They suggest that all countries have their own unique character, culture, and idiosyncrasies. Second, Benson and Matsumura propose to challenge the view that late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Japan was in some ways a peculiarly, if not uniquely, homogeneous society. They argue that Japan was, in fact, virtually like any other society, being divided by age, gender, and ethnicity, by region and geography, by occupational diversity and economic inequality, and by ideological predisposition and political affiliation. Lastly, Benson and Matsumura propose that if Japan was neither unique nor homogeneous, then the nation's history must be considered in terms of the specific political, economic, social, and cultural circumstances that pertain to this critical period.

It is from this starting point that the book moves forward, and throughout the book, the authors continually return to their three propositions and question why things happened the way that they did in Japan during the period, as well as why both Western and Japanese authors have chosen to interpret events as if Japan was in some way "unique." This structure of questioning why certain views have become widely accepted, as well as the evidence that Benson and Matsumura present to show how these views are often incorrect, will, I think, help undergraduates to understand how Japan worked during this period.

It is on the basis of these three propositions that Benson and Matsumura proceed to thematically discuss this vital historical period. The themes are politics and political systems; international relations and imperial expansion; economic growth, industrial relations, consumption and saving; education, religion, and the media; and lastly the individual, family, class, and nation. In taking a thematic rather than a chronological approach, Benson and Matsumura allow the newcomer to Japanese history to see how the various components within Japanese society played their part in a specific theme. Obviously, within each chapter events are presented in a chronological manner, but I believe that restricting examination to a particular aspect of Japanese society will allow undergraduate students a greater opportunity to grasp what is actually occurring. One of the problems that many

undergraduates face when studying this period in Japan, given the unfamiliar names and terms, is the inability to see the complete picture and the degree of continuity that exists.

For example, under the theme of "politics and political system," the reader is shown how Japan moved from a feudal regime, with the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1868, through the establishment of a "modern" system of government that transformed the nation. In their explanation of how this happened Benson and Matsumura give a clear picture of the challenges that faced Japan at the time, as well as showing how these challenges were overcome. Next they show how the political system that was established in the late nineteenth century moved first towards the ideal of liberal democracy in the 1920s, but then shifted towards authoritarianism and "dictatorship" in the 1930s and 1940s. Although the term "dictatorship" is used in the heading, Benson and Matsumura do clarify this by saying that Tojo Hideki "though not a dictator wielded more power than any other twentieth century prime minister and probably bore more responsibility than any other individual for the way in which the Pacific War was conducted" (p. 43). The explanation of these different stages is accompanied by clear headings, so that an undergraduate student can easily follow the shifts that were occurring in the political world. In addition there are figures to illustrate some of the important shifts that influenced politics in Japan.

The use of figures to illustrate specific points is one thing that I especially liked about this book. In discussing the changes that occurred in Japanese politics, it is often hard to grasp the important role that specific groups played at different times, as well as the degree of continuity. To better help the reader, Benson and Matsumura have included, for example, a figure showing the background, origin, and status of prime ministers in this period. In the first figure a bar graph is used to indicate the degree of influence three groups–the genro, the Satsuma and Choshu clique, and the samurai or Imperial Court–had on the cabinets between 1885 and 1945 (p. 24). The vertical axis shows the degree of political involvement of each group, while the horizontal axis shows the composition of the cabinets for eight time periods, with the number of cabinets during each time period given in brackets. For example, between 1885 and 1890, cabinets were composed entirely of individuals from all three groups, while between 1937 and 1945, there was no involvement by either the genro or imperial court, but involvement by the Satsuma and Choshu clique still amounted to almost 40 percent. The figure allows undergraduate students to see the ebb and flow of the influence the various groups had over the period.

Benson and Matsumura include a second figure, this one showing the characteristics of successive prime ministers and cabinets (p. 32). This second figure looks at the extent to which non-party cabinets and the military background of the prime minister were contributing factors in Japanese politics for the period. Importantly, the horizontal axis of figure 2 is the same as that in figure 1, allowing students to make further comparisons of the role that the various groups illustrated in both figures played in Japanese politics.

Each of the thematic chapters has a conclusion that reviews how the material covered applies to the three propositions raised by the authors in the introduction. The chapters are especially well referenced, with extensive notes appearing at the end of each showing the wide range of sources that Benson and Matsumura have drawn from. In addition, Benson and Matsumura employ the device of placing the author's name in bold type for the first entry, making it easy for readers to find specific bibliographical information if they wish to do any further reading.

The book includes twelve monochrome illustrations that show specific aspects of Japan's political, social, and economic life during the period between 1885 and 1945. These are skillfully used: for example, two images contrast the image of Japanese women during the period. One shows women in 1929 making demands for voting power during municipal elections, while the other shows a Japanese woman traditionally dressed practicing calligraphy. The contrast between the two is striking. In the first we have a scene of women seeking empowerment, and regardless of the actual number of women who did so during the period, it challenges the idea that all Japanese women were subservient. This is contrasted with the image of the kimono-clad maiden practicing calligraphy, an image well loved, both by Japanese traditionalists and Western romantics.

The cover also rates a mention, as it is a dramatic image of the Emperor Meiji, clad in military uniform astride a rearing horse. This captures the imperialistic feel of the period nicely, and serves as a good starting point to the book. If I were to make a small criticism of the illustrations, it is a shame that the authors chose to include a second illustration of the Emperor Meiji, as well as one of Pearl Harbor, rather than illustrations of the lesser-known Emperor Taisho and his son Emperor Showa.

As well as the illustrations, the book also contains three appendices, and I think the authors deserve particular credit for including a teaching tool that is of-

ten lacking in other general works. As mentioned earlier, newcomers to Japanese history are often confused by the multitude of personal names, place names, and events that are mentioned, and find it hard to keep track of all of the comings and goings during this turbulent eighty years. To reduce this confusion the first appendix is a timeline spread over nine pages showing the major events and developments that occurred between 1850 and 1952. The appendix shows the main themes of each period, dates, and specific events. Within each time period there are further delineations; for example, on page 240 the left-hand text briefly explains the growth of Meiji conservatism in the 1880s, while on the right hand there is a list of events during this period that the authors feel are relevant. By laying the chronology out in this manner, the authors have been able to show both the major themes of a period, as well as the minor components that go to shape each period. In addition, going back to the 1850s, rather than starting in 1868 with the Meiji Restoration, means that students have some of the background to the changes that occurred.

The second appendix is a seven-page glossary of Japanese terms, which is misleadingly named, as it also includes brief biographies of many of the major players of these periods. The additional use of bold typeface to indicate cross-references within the glossary and italics to refer to people, groups, and/or events within the chapters further adds to the effectiveness of the glossary. The information included is brief but well written, and includes information such as appropriate dates.

Finally, appendix 3 is a select bibliography for each of the seven major chapters–the introduction, the five thematic chapters and the epilogue–which lists between eight and eighteen recommended texts to allow further exploration of the topics covered. It should be noted that while the authors have drawn on both English-language and Japanese-language sources, Benson and Matsumura believe that the English-language materials will be of most use to the reader. While there are other general histories of the period that include a glossary and a selected bibliography, I am unaware of one that also includes a detailed time chart that will allow students to visualize the train of events. Not all students learn in the same way, and having an additional tool such as timelines to assist comprehension is a real benefit of this volume.

As I said at the beginning of this review, I feel that as a book designed for undergraduate students it is well thought out and easy to use. The division of this complex period of Japanese history into themes will allow undergraduate students a better understanding of trends within a particular theme, whether it is politics, international relations, or the family. I especially liked the use of contemporary quotes, from such diverse sources as popular songs and letters to the newspapers, in the sections that dealt with Japanese society during this period as these helped to bring to life the people of the period. Again, the quotes used challenge the idea that the majority of the Japanese were a homogenous, passive mass. By way of contrast, the quotations are also used to show how the ruling elite sought to control the masses through education and indoctrination.

If I were to have any reservations about this book, it would be that it only goes as far as 1952, meaning that for an introductory course on Japanese history the past fifty years, since the end of the Occupation, are neglected. While the book does make reference, in passing, to things that have occurred since 1952, a second book covering from 1952 onward would be required for such a course.

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Citation: James Boyd. Review of Benson, John; Matsumura, Takao, *Japan, 1868-1945: From Isolation to Occupation.* H-Japan, H-Net Reviews. May, 2003.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7529

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