

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

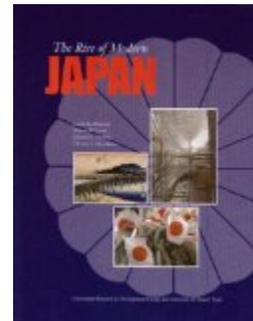
Andrew Gordon. *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. xiv + 384 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-511060-9; \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-511061-6.

Mikiso Hane. *Modern Japan: A Historical Survey.* Boulder: Westview Press, 2001. x + 554 pp. \$33.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8133-3756-2.

Linda K. Menton, Noren W. Lush, Eileen H. Tamura, Chance I. Gusukuma. *The Rise of Modern Japan.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003. x + 274 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-2531-7.

Reviewed by Paul Dunscomb (Department of History/Geography, University of Alaska Anchorage)

Published on H-Japan (June, 2003)



What's New in Modern Japanese History?

What's New in Modern Japanese History?

These are boom times for those of us who teach modern Japan at the undergraduate level. Over the last several years a number of new choices to introduce students to the fundamentals of Japanese history have appeared. Trying to choose one to be the principal textbook for a modern Japanese history course can be very difficult. Certainly this choice cannot be made on the basis of the books' titles, as there appear to be strict limitations on the wording authors and publishers are free to use. One can select a *Making of Modern Japan* either by Kenneth Pyle or Marius Jansen. How is one to choose between James McClain's *Japan: A Modern History* or Andrew Gordon's *A Modern History of Japan*? Mikiso Hane's *Modern Japan: A Historical Survey* or *The Rise of Modern Japan* by Menton et al. are hardly more original, distinctive, or descriptive of their contents.[1]

Leaving this problem to future authors and publishers, I will attempt to evaluate three of these recent works, Gordon's *A Modern History of Japan: >From Tokugawa Times to the Present*, Hane's *Modern Japan: A Historical*

Survey, and Menton, et al.'s *The Rise of Modern Japan*. All of them, in one way or another, highlight the various problems inherent in choosing a text that is right for the course you wish to teach.

In designing my own modern Japanese history course, I was especially concerned with finding a text that could meet a number of specific criteria. First, I sought a compelling narrative to hold the students' interest over the course of the semester. The text had to give students sufficient information for a basic understanding of the development of Japanese history since roughly the establishment of the Tokugawa Shogunate but not be so loaded with detail as to obscure the major points. The text needed to fit within my own overall interpretation of Japanese history as discussed in lectures (or compel me to alter my lectures to match it). The text also needed to be a synthesis of the best recent scholarship regarding Japan to give students an understanding of the complexity of Japanese history but also of the ongoing nature of the scholarly enterprise. In the end my hope was that the students would come away from the course with the most up-to-date "take" on modern Japan as well as an un-

derstanding of the fact that historical “truth” is not fixed.

By this token, *The Rise of Modern Japan* by Linda K. Menton, et al., the second in a series by the Curriculum Research and Development Group, University of Hawai‘i, is intriguing but ultimately unsatisfying. The book itself provides limited information regarding the Curriculum Research and Development Group or its mission and no indication of exactly who its intended audience might be. My guess is that it is aimed more at a high school audience, possibly taking an advanced placement course. It features only three chapters, each broken up into three sections. The first chapter, “Building the Early Modern State, 1600-1912,” devotes a section to the Tokugawa Shogunate, a section to the Meiji restoration and revolution, and a section to “conservative reaction and the cost of building a Modern State.” Chapter 2, “Modernization, Crisis and War, 1912-1945,” has sections devoted to the Taisho period, 1912-1926, from the end of Taisho to the beginning of the China Incident in 1937, and from 1937 to the end of the war. Chapter 3, “Recovery and the Rise of an Economic Superpower,” devotes a section to the occupation, a section to economic growth and social change from 1952 to the present, and a parallel section on Japan and the world.

An example of the book’s basic approach comes in the first section of chapter 2. “Taisho: Challenging Authority and Tradition, 1912-1926” begins with a brief statement of intent. “In this section we examine the growing diversity in Japanese society during the Taisho period and the ways in which people began demanding a greater say in how their government and economy operated” (p. 88). There is a short sidebar describing the Taisho emperor. After a brief sketch of changes in the Japanese economy there are activities; one asks students to draw conclusions on changes to Japan’s modern and traditional economies based on information in a graph, while another asks students to plot changes in Japan’s population based on figures given. Next, there is a section on labor activism which includes texts of the basic principles of the Yuaikai labor organization and its successor the Sodomei. Questions ask the students to analyze the beliefs and concerns of organized labor as expressed in these documents.

Next follows a section on the rice riots of 1918, which includes the lyrics of a song bitterly denouncing the pursuit of empire while the people starve.[2] Questions require students to interpret the meaning of the song. The following section maps out political power during the period, giving thumbnail sketches of the emperor, el-

der statesmen, prime minister, Cabinet, army and navy ministers, Privy Council, The Diet, and the electorate. Students are asked to make a flow chart showing the relationships between these various actors. A description of the Taisho political crisis of 1913 and a discussion of the Peace Preservation law of 1925 are followed by more questions and activities. A discussion of the changes in women’s lives is followed by a long quote from Yamashiro Tomoe’s story “Bog Rhubarb Shoots.”[3] Questions help the students analyze the story. Another long excerpt from the diary of the wife of a Kyoto merchant is given with more questions focusing on the nature of women’s experience in the period.[4] Two more long excerpts from primary sources provide a glimpse of life in the modern city and the largely unchanged countryside, with questions aimed at helping students compare and contrast the two.[5] Finally there is a brief discussion of Japanese imperialism during the era, focusing on relations with China and the West. A short conclusion summarizes the chapter and “extension activities” (or homework) suggest various assignments the students might undertake to further their understanding of developments in Japan in this period. A short bibliography on the period follows.

One exemplary feature of the book is its lavish illustrations. This includes not only graphs, charts, and timelines, but also a number of well-drawn and useful maps. It is also chock full of excellent photographs, exquisitely reproduced wood block prints, and numerous other products of Japan’s wonderfully diverse visual culture (a task only a large format book on glossy paper such as this can really pull off). The authors also cannot be faulted for bringing together a vast amount of primary material from a diverse list of sources. It does a good job of introducing students to basic facts about Japanese history as well as the nuts and bolts of historical analysis and interpretation. What is lacking, however, which would ultimately disqualify it from inclusion in my course, is any serious attempt at synthesis. The authors are at pains to provide a diversity of views and then have the students uncover their meaning on their own. This is a laudable goal, and yet I question the ability of students in an introductory course to do this without first having major problems of Japanese history placed in a wider context. In other words, the authors must be more up front about precisely which narrative they wish to place the story of modern Japan in and the problems which arise by doing so.

In many ways, somewhat similar problems bedevil Mikiso Hane’s *Modern Japan: A Historical Survey*. The

book is a much more traditional and straightforward narrative of Japanese history. It begins with a chapter on early Japanese history, two chapters describing the establishment of the Tokugawa Bakufu and its development, followed by a chapter on its collapse. Five chapters are devoted to the Meiji Restoration and Revolution, examining political, economic, social, and cultural developments in detail. Two chapters on the “era of parliamentary ascendancy” discuss the period from the Taisho political crisis to the end of party Cabinets in 1932. A chapter is devoted to the rise of militarism, another to expansion of the China war to include Britain and the United States, and a third to the Pacific war and its end. One chapter covers the occupation along with postwar political and economic developments continuing to the present, while another covers postwar social, cultural, and intellectual developments.

Hane’s description of events is straightforward and entirely adequate with a generous supply of intriguing and useful factoids included. It is somehow curiously satisfying to know that 65 percent of the land in Japan with a slope of 15 degrees or less is farmed, or that the expansion of the voting franchise in 1919 from those paying 10 yen in tax to those paying 3 yen increased the number of eligible voters from 1.5 to 3.3 million (pp. 3, 245). Yet the text suffers from a number of handicaps which, taken as a whole, make me reluctant to recommend it for use as the primary source for a class.

First, while the third edition does attempt to bring the story of Japan up to the present day, Hane’s basic narrative of Japanese history is old. Most of the sources cited for the individual chapters date from the sixties or seventies. No particular effort has been made to incorporate various questions Japan scholars are currently attempting to wrestle into the narrative. This is critical for our understanding of numerous issues: the nature of Japan’s political development in the prewar period, the role of emperor Hirohito, and the participation of non-samurai in the Westernization of Japan during the early Meiji period, to name just a few which are undergoing considerable change. The bibliography incorporates several of the most important recent works, yet is weighted heavily toward scholarship that is, at least, thirty to forty years old.

Although Hane, a longtime professor of history at Knox College, is well regarded for his work on “marginal” groups in modern Japan, his narrative devotes most of its space to political and economic developments—perhaps more than is necessary. The story of the formation of

Japan’s earliest political parties and the maneuverings of its first generation of politicians, for example, is clearly important, yet to focus too much on the Byzantine workings of the political system risks confusing students who may be encountering this material for the first time. For an introductory textbook it is more important to give students an overall frame of reference rather than the details regarding the infighting between elder statesmen such as Ito Hirobumi and Yamagata Aritomo.

Finally, and for me most critically, Hane’s coverage of postwar Japan is simply inadequate. This is a problem he shares with Marius Jansen’s *The Making of Modern Japan*, so possibly the problem is inherent in an older generation of scholars, incapable of viewing postwar Japan as anything other than “current events.” Nevertheless, the two chapters devoted to the last fifty-five years of the twentieth century in Japan make no concession to the richness and diversity of Japan’s postwar history. The fact that the occupation period is lumped in with the era of high-speed economic growth, Nixon, and oil shocks; the bubble economy (a phrase Hane employs only once and in passing); the death of emperor Hirohito and the end of Showa; as well as the lost decade of the 1990s demonstrates an unwillingness to seriously tackle the various issues raised by Japan’s postwar experience, the problems of change and continuity, of differentiating between trans-war and postwar phenomena, that scholars are dealing with today.

>From that standpoint Andrew Gordon’s *A Modern History of Japan* is very welcome indeed. The book is divided into four parts. Part 1, “Crisis of the Tokugawa Regime,” has four chapters devoted to the establishment of the regime, social and economic transformations, intellectual developments, and the overthrow of the Tokugawa. Part 2, “Modern Revolution, 1868-1905,” also has four chapters, dedicated to formation of the Meiji state by Japan’s samurai-dominated elites; calls on the part of the larger population for greater representation; social, economic, and cultural transformations under Meiji; and the establishment of empire and constitutional politics. Part 3, “Imperial Japan from Ascendance to Ashes,” has five chapters examining the economy and society, democracy between the world wars, depression crisis and response, wartime Japan, and the occupation. Finally, part 4, “Postwar and Contemporary Japan, 1952-2000,” concludes with four chapters dealing with economic and social transformations, political struggles and settlements of the High-Growth era, Japan’s rise to global power in the 1980s, and an examination of post-postwar Japan in the Heisei era.

The periodization that Gordon employs is indicative of the ways in which recent scholarship has changed how historians perceive the course of modern Japanese history and the central role Gordon himself has played in this transformation. With his ground breaking work on organized labor in both the prewar and postwar periods, Gordon, a professor of history at Harvard, has consistently worked to open up the story of Japan's development to a much wider array of voices.[6] These voices receive ample coverage here. Gordon has incorporated, as a central part of his narrative, a re-conception of Japan's prewar political institutions, which he articulated over a decade ago, evolving from imperial bureaucracy to imperial democracy to imperial authoritarianism (although he would still prefer to call it fascism) (p. 202). Not surprisingly, from the person who first asked us to consider postwar Japan as history, Gordon gives ample room to recent questions and scholarship on the postwar period, with an emphasis on trans-war phenomena that have played a decisive role in shaping modern Japan.[7]

Indeed, Gordon has gone even farther. More so than any of the other authors mentioned in this review, Gordon is at pains to place the story of modern Japan squarely within the larger narrative of modernity itself. This is a critical factor, for by rigorously contextualizing the experience of Japan and the Japanese, especially within the story of nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperialism and post-World War Two globalization, he has forestalled any tendency to portray Japan as unique. Certainly the responses of the Japanese (elites, subjects, and citizens alike) to the problems generated by modernity has a distinctive character all its own, but Gordon cuts the ground from beneath the feet of advocates for Japanese "uniqueness," whether eighteenth-century advocates of national learning or present-day advocates of Nihonjinron, by expanding his focus.

Unquestionably, Gordon comes closest to satisfying all my criteria for selection as a basic history text and I would unhesitatingly adopt it for a graduate-level course on Japanese history. The one reason I would not immediately throw over my own personal choice, Kenneth Pyle's *The Making of Modern Japan*, for Gordon is the simple question of length. Of all the recent entries in the field, nothing yet can match Pyle's masterpiece of concision.

In looking over all these recent attempts to bring the history of modern Japan up to date, I am left with only one question. Will there ever be someone willing to tackle a history of Japan that gives equal weight to developments before 1600? The dilemma of choosing between modern Japanese history texts is one that I wish occurred more often. Yet, for an East Asian Civilizations course taught over two semesters, I am desperate to find a single text on Japan that can do double duty. I have searched long and hard for such a text and evaluated many candidates, but have yet to find anything satisfying. However, the story of such a quest should be left for another review.

Notes

[1]. Kenneth Pyle, *The Making of Modern Japan*, 2nd ed. (Lexington and Toronto: D.C. Heath and Company, 1996); Marius Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2000); and James L. McClain, *Japan, A Modern History* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2002).

[2]. The song, "Carefree," is taken from Michael Lewis, *Rioters and Citizens: Mass Protest in Imperial Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 101.

[3]. Taken From Mikiso Hane, *Peasants, Rebels and Outcasts: The Underside of Modern Japan* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), pp. 85-101.

[4]. Nakano Makiko, *Makiko's Diary: A Merchant Wife in 1910 Kyoto*, translated by Kazuko Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 69-141.

[5]. T. Fujimoto, *The Nightside of Japan* (London: T. Werner Laurie, Ltd., 1927), pp. 28-33; and Junichi Saga, *Memories of Silk and Straw: A Self-Portrait of Small-Town Japan*, translated by Gary O. Evans (Tokyo: Kodansha International, Ltd., 1987), pp. 176-179.

[6]. Andrew Gordon, *Labor and Imperial Democracy in Prewar Japan* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1991), and *The Wages of Affluence: Labor and Management in Postwar Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

[7]. Andrew Gordon, ed., *Postwar Japan as History* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1993).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-japan>

Citation: Paul Dunscomb. Review of Gordon, Andrew, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present* and Hane, Mikiso, *Modern Japan: A Historical Survey* and Menton, Linda K.; Lush, Noren W.; Tamura, Eileen H.; Gusukuma, Chance I., *The Rise of Modern Japan*. H-Japan, H-Net Reviews. June, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7676>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.