
BACKGROUND BOOKS

EVERYDAY LIFE IN JAPAN

Japanese culture may ultimately thwart Western efforts to comprehend it, but the Western urge to "read" Japanese society has become, if anything, even keener during recent years. The reason is obvious. Americans and Europeans want to understand the engine that has powered Japan's economic ascent during the postwar era.

Anyone curious about the workings of this complex social machine would do well to start with the late Edwin O. Reischauer's **Japanese Today: Change and Continuity** (Harvard Univ., 1988). Reischauer, who was a Harvard professor of history and served as U.S. ambassador to Tokyo, was born in Japan, the son of a Protestant missionary. His knowledge of his subject is intimate, almost familial. But while his view of Japanese "otherness" is more sympathetic than that of the current "revisionist" scholars, he pulls no punches when he treats Japanese foibles and follies: "It is not easy for them to give up their past cozy life, safely insulated by their language barrier and thriving economy, for a more adventurous life dealing with the problems of world peace and the global economy. To put it in dramatic terms, they find it hard to join the human race. For one thing, they still have inadequate skills of communication. More seriously, they have a strong sense of separateness." This extensive revision of his earlier book, **The Japanese** (Harvard, 1977), provides a survey of Japanese history from the third century A.D. through the late 1970s and a shrewd discussion of contemporary political and economic life. Reischauer is at his best, however, when decoding the intangible qualities of Japanese society—interpersonal relationships and values.

Unlike Reischauer, the anthropologist Ruth Benedict never lived in Japan. Her knowledge of the culture was based on extensive reading and on interviews with Japanese-Americans. But though she treated her subject from afar, her book, **Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture** (Houghton Mifflin, 1946; 1989), has become an indispensable introduction to the complexities of the Japanese people. Writing around the end of World

War II, Benedict set out to interpret the contradictions suggested by her book's title: How could a people of such sensitivity and aesthetic refinement also sustain a cult of the sword? To find answers, she explored Japan's hierarchical social system, the importance of reciprocal obligations in relationships, the power of shame, and the related necessity of clearing one's name through revenge or suicide. Self-discipline, Benedict discovered, was the true "sword" of Japanese character: "Japanese of all classes judge themselves and others in terms of a whole set of concepts which depend upon their notion of generalized technical self-control and self-governance."

Scholars generally agree that the strength of Benedict's book is her interpretation of traditional society, but many fault her efforts to show how traditional notions continued to shape modern Japan. Here, clearly, her lack of direct contact proved to be a handicap. Fortunately, it is not one that has afflicted most postwar Western students of Japanese life and culture. Perhaps the best single introduction to their work is Robert J. Smith's **Japanese Society: Tradition, Self, and the Social Order** (Cambridge Univ., 1983). In four masterful lectures, Smith, a Cornell anthropologist, explains how modern Japan became a mass industrial society significantly different from its Western counterparts. Traditional values, including the urge to create a "perfect society," are decisive, he argues. The great difference between Japan and the West "lies less in its organization and institutions than in the way all of its history shows how the Japanese think about man and society and the relationship between the two."

The people who have come to typify the postwar Japanese are, of course, the members of the New Middle Class. During the 1950s, Harvard sociologist Ezra Vogel studied five families in suburban Tokyo, and though his work is now somewhat dated, **Japan's New Middle Class: The Salary Man and his Family in a Tokyo Suburb** (Univ. of Calif., 1963; 1971) remains a valuable portrait of white-collar employees (government and corporate) and their "nuclear" families. Vogel's dissection of chang-

ing family relationships is particularly astute: "It may seem paradoxical that even though the salaried family represents the most radical departure from tradition in many ways, the opportunity of the wife of the salary man to be home and devoted to the children has made the mutual dependency of the mother and child even stronger in the salary-man families than in other occupational groups." For a more extensive (and recent) look at these middle-class housewives, one may turn to Anne E. Imamura's **Urban Japanese Housewives: At Home and in the Community** (Univ. of Hawaii, 1987).

A book that succeeds brilliantly in tracing the lifeways of individuals who were born and raised in prewar and wartime Japan but came to maturity during the postwar years is David W. Plath's **Long Engagements: Maturity in Modern Japan** (Stanford Univ., 1980). Plath, an anthropologist at the University of Illinois, mixes oral autobiographies of four middle-aged men and women residing in the Osaka-Kōbe area with stories from four contemporary novels and short essays bearing on Japanese society. For each of his subjects, including a former "suicide cadet," he shows the sustaining power of "long engagements"—relationships with friends, co-workers, and relatives. Plath's book is most instructive about the ways in which people preserve meaning and individuality as they age, even in a culture so often perceived as group-dominated and conformist.

Other excellent ethnographic studies point

to a similar variety within Japanese society, a diversity stemming from regional as well as occupational differences. To understand the changes in rural Japan during the last 60 years, one should begin with John Embree's **Suye Mura: A Japanese Village** (Univ. of Chicago, 1939; 1964). Embree, the only Western anthropologist to conduct fieldwork in prewar Ja-

pan, produced this study after spending a year in a southern Kyūshū farming village with his wife, Ella Lury Wiswell. During that year, Wiswell kept an extensive journal, rich in details about women's lives. More than 40 years later, Robert J. Smith organized these notes into **The Women of Suye Mura** (Chicago, 1982). One finds no delicate flowers here. The hard-drinking, independent farm women of Suye Mura long resisted Meiji-inspired efforts to make Japanese women into submissive housekeepers. Two other noteworthy studies of rural Japan are Ronald P. Dore's **Shinohata: Portrait of a Japanese Village** (Pantheon, 1978), a wittily drawn portrait of the central Honshū farming village that the author, a British sociologist, visited several times between 1955 and 1975, and **Haru-**

ko's World: A Japanese Farm Woman and Her Community (Stanford, 1983) by Gail Lee Bernstein, a professor of anthropology at the University of Arizona. Both show how mechanization, modernization, and growing prosperity have altered the work habits and outlooks of the nation's highly respected farmers.

When one thinks of Japan's postwar boom,



one thinks primarily of the cities. Today, 31 million people, or roughly one quarter of all Japanese, live in metropolitan Tokyo alone. The growth of the suburbs has been steady, but so far this centrifugal pressure has not killed the inner cities. A resilient urban culture still shapes the lives of many Japanese, providing a sense of order and tradition amid the commercialism and congestion. Theodore C. Bestor, a Columbia University anthropologist, details the daily workings of a middle-class residential and commercial district in **Neighborhood Tokyo** (Stanford, 1989) to show just how vital neighborhood life remains. His book nicely complements Ronald Dore's earlier study of the life in a lower-middle-class neighborhood, **City Life in Japan: A Study of a Tokyo Ward** (Calif., 1958).

Bestor's book shows how the family firm merges work and family life in ways reminiscent of the traditional home. But for most other Japanese, work takes place in spheres completely separate from the household. In **Japanese Blue Collar: The Changing Tradition** (Calif., 1971), based partly on his own experience as an employee in two Japanese factories, sociologist Robert E. Cole deals with everything from wage-scales and promotion to the paternalistic style of company-worker relations. A worker's-eye view of life within a public corporation can be found in Paul H. Noguchi's **Delayed Departures, Overdue Arrivals** (Hawaii, 1990). Noguchi, a Japanese-American, hired on with the Japanese National Railways shortly before it was broken up into several private corporations. His novel approach to Japanese corporate life explains what daily reality is like for someone whose greatest ambition is to rise to the position of stationmaster. To succeed requires not only high examination scores but prodigious stamina: Assistant stationmasters routinely work the 24-hour *tetsuya* shift, which includes only four hours of sleep.

The Japanese work hard, but they do occasionally break for other rituals of everyday life, including marriage. In premodern Japan, weddings were modest household ceremonies that sealed what were often arranged marriages. But today more than 90 percent of all unions,

whether arranged or elected, take place in "wedding palaces," complete with Shinto or even Christian trappings. Walter Edwards, another Japanese-American ethnographer, worked for a time in one of these palaces. His **Modern Japan Through Its Weddings: Gender, Person, and Society in Ritual Portrayal** (Stanford, 1989) shows how commercialization affects, and reflects, the changing symbolic content of the Japanese wedding. His analysis of ceremony leads Edwards to conclusions about the meaning of marriage to contemporary Japanese: "Thus while the legal form of the *ie* [the traditional family extending across generations] has been abolished, its underlying principles of hierarchy and harmonious interdependence—principles that inevitably deny the autonomy of the individual—survive in its successor as basic [husband-wife] unit."

Before work or marriage comes schooling, and a vast literature on Japanese education now exists. One book that probes beyond the clichés and generalizations about the nation's postwar educational triumphs is **Japan's High Schools** by Thomas P. Rohlen (Calif., 1983). The author, a Stanford anthropologist, investigated five different high schools in the industrial port city of Kōbe. As well as describing school organization, classroom instruction, teacher and union politics, textbooks, and extracurricular activities, Rohlen reveals the chasm separating a fast-track prep school at the top of Kōbe system from a technical school at the bottom. One leaves this book with a keen appreciation of the extent to which examinations are fate in modern Japan.

The competitiveness bred in Japanese schools translates well into economic competitiveness in the global marketplace. But as many of these books suggest, competitiveness can foster individualism, and a too-powerful individualism threatens the very core of Japanese values: the group loyalties expressed through powerful connections with family, neighborhood, region, and nation. For all of Japan's differences, then, its fate is not so different from that of other nations that have achieved prosperity and global influence. It must avoid becoming the victim of its own success.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This bibliography was put together with the assistance of Frank Joseph Shulman, author of Japan, Vol. 103, World Bibliographical Series (ABC Clío, 1989).

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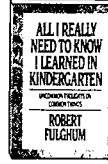


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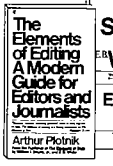
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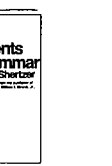
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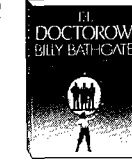
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