

Every Sunday, leather-clad teen-agers spill out of Harajuku Station and head toward Yoyogi Park, there to dance until dark. The passion for such distractions has its critics: A recent government white paper asserted that today's Japanese youth are "devoid of perseverance, dependent upon others, and self-centered."

Japan's New Popular Culture

On any given day, Americans encounter something from Japan. To Detroit's dismay, roughly 1.9 million U.S. citizens purchased Toyotas, Datsuns, and other Japanese-made cars in 1984. At work, we use Canon copiers, Komatsu tractors, and Epson computers. At home, we listen to Panasonic or AIWA stereos and watch TV on Sony or Hitachi sets. Scarcely a week of network evening news passes without some mention of Japan, either as economic rival or as political ally.

Yet, despite this daily presence, Japan today remains a country no less strange to American eyes than it was some eight decades ago. It was then that the American Lafcadio Hearn, one of the first Japan scholars, wrote of "the immense difficulty of perceiving and comprehending what underlies the surface of Japanese life."

Current American attempts to understand Japan reflect continuing confusion. Business analysts speak of Japan's economic success—quality-control circles, high worker productivity—in almost mystical tones. Sociologists sketch a society of labyrinthine complexity. Historians go back to the violent extremes of the feudal Tokugawa era (1603–1868) or the horrors of the Pacific War. Feature stories in American magazines and newspapers concentrate on kabuki performances, flower arranging, geisha, and tea ceremonies. What emerges from these various viewpoints is a fragmented, two-dimensional portrait, one that most Japanese would have trouble recognizing.

Unfortunately, fewer and fewer Americans know enough about Japan to overcome the prevailing stereotypes. The nation's top postwar Japanologists, most of whom first came to Japan as members of the U.S. military during the Second World War, are all nearing retirement. So are the bilingual, second-generation Japanese Americans (*Nisei*) who worked in various U.S. government agencies. No comparable crop of Japanologists

has appeared to take their place. In 1982, a mere 731 Americans were studying in Japan, versus the 2,656 U.S. students in Italy; in contrast, almost 11,000 Japanese were at universities and colleges in the United States.

Japan deserves closer attention, not least because it is emerging from a major postwar political and social transformation. During the 1970s, rapid economic growth and a young population—20 percent of all Japanese were between the ages of 15 and 24 in 1973—exposed a highly traditional society to unsettling new influences. Today, observes Kusaka Kimindo, a Tokyo economist and former Wilson Center Guest Scholar, a more prosperous population has abandoned the single-minded pursuit of economic advance and is entering a less arduous “cultural-intellectual” phase.

Popular culture is prospering in this new age. Japan is a society known for its collective instincts, and books, magazines, movies, and TV shows draw a wide audience. As the Japanese scholar Kuwabara Takeo points out, “A fad in Japan does not just take hold among urban or regional groups, but sweeps through most of the nation.” Thanks to such broad appeal, popular culture acts as a good mirror of Japanese social values. And since it takes forms familiar to both the East and the West, it provides an accessible means of cultural comparison.

Here, Fumiko Mori Halloran examines a recent sampling of Japanese best-selling books. Frederik L. Schodt analyzes the Japanese passion for *manga*, or comic books. James Bailey looks at Japan’s big box-office movies.

—Ronald A. Morse

Ronald A. Morse, 46, is secretary of the Asia Program at the Wilson Center and a specialist in Japanese folklore.

BEST SELLERS

by Fumiko Mori Halloran

Some 600 years before Madame de La Fayette penned *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678), one of the first European novels, Lady Murasaki Shikibu told *The Tale of Genji*, an elegant fictional portrayal of life at the Japanese imperial court at Kyōto. Since then, Japan has produced its share of first-class writers, both men and women.

International recognition did not come until 1968, when the Japanese novelist Kawabata Yasunari received the Nobel Prize in literature. "His narrative mastership," noted the president of the Swedish Academy of Letters, ". . . expresses the essence of the Japanese mind."

To Westerners, the subtle psychology and traditional settings of Kawabata's novels may symbolize the "essence" of Japan. But his works bear little resemblance to the books read by most of today's 119.5 million Japanese. At one of the busiest intersections near Tokyo Station, the Yaesu Book Center houses more than one million different novels, mysteries, biographies, histories, cookbooks, romances, and treatises on science, politics, and economics. The aisles are crowded with students, housewives, business executives, and retirees, all engaged in the popular practice of *tachiyomi*, or reading while standing.

What makes a best seller in Japan?

In a country where the average paperback or hardcover costs roughly one-third of its U.S. equivalent, the range of best-selling titles is enormous. In 1982, best sellers included *How to Enjoy Baseball Ten Times More* and an unadorned edition of *The Japanese Constitution*. Foreign works also do well, especially analyses of business success and economic trends. The Japanese have bought more than 400,000 copies of the translated version of *In Search of Excellence* (1982), a survey of well-run American companies by Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman.

For the most part, however, Japanese historical epics, self-help manuals, mysteries, and biographies remain the readers' favorites. The novels regularly serialized in the national daily newspapers—among them the *Yomiuri* (1983 morning circulation, 8.9 million), the *Asahi* (7.5 million), and the *Mainichi* (4.4 million)—also sit high on best-seller lists.

Best-selling books seldom attract much serious scholarly attention. After all, what valid conclusions about Japan could be

drawn from the popularity of *An Introduction to Astrology* (1979), a two-volume work that sold a total of 7.8 million copies over two years? Consistently popular genres or themes, however, can serve as a fairly accurate cultural barometer.

To begin with, the current prominence of the million-copy best seller attests to the transformation of Japan during the last 25 years. More leisure time, higher incomes, and postwar educational reforms have given more Japanese more time and inclination to read. Since 1960, the number of books bought every year in Japan has quadrupled; the number of new titles has tripled. In 1983, the Japanese publishing industry put out roughly 31,000 new titles and a total of 1.2 billion volumes. The United States, a nation with twice Japan's population, published 42,000 new titles and a total of 1.9 billion volumes.

Swimming in the Nude

As books have become more popular, so too have their authors. Novelist Osaragi Jirō, who drew a large following with *Homecoming* (1948), the story of a Japanese expatriate who returns from Malaya at the end of World War II, was seen or heard primarily in literary circles. But Nozaka Akiyuki, a best-selling novelist during the late 1960s and '70s, also gave solo singing concerts and modeled men's wear. And Itsuki Hiroyuki, who gained broad appeal with *Gate of Adolescence*, his two-volume 1976 novel about a young man's move from a small Kyūshū town to the bright lights of Tokyo, profited from radio talk shows and the lecture circuit, where his handsome features attracted a large female audience.

According to Odagiri Kazuo, the head of publications at the prestigious Japanese publishing house Bungei Shunjū, prize-winning novels today are likely to come from "bankers, singers, stewardesses, film directors, cartoonists, and boxers—people writing miscellanies out of some small fund of personal experience." And as in the United States, many television talk-show hosts and "pop" sociologists have become "experts," their opinions sought and published on everything from teen-age mores to educational policy.

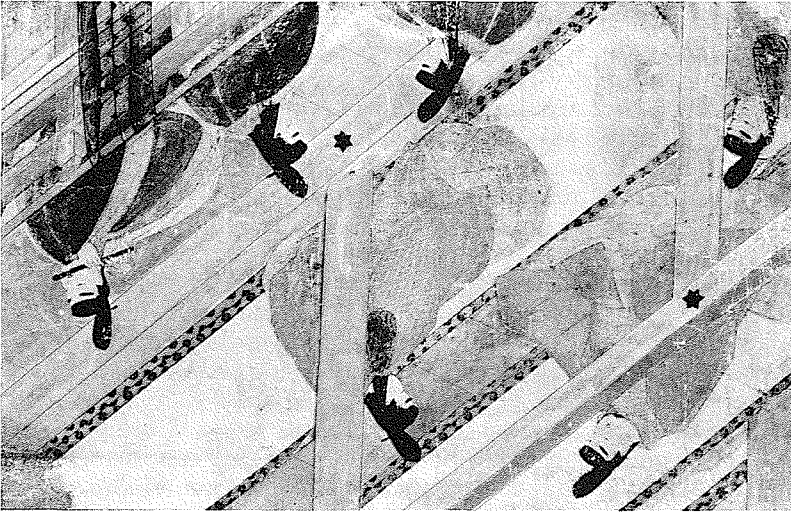
Fumiko Mori Halloran, 41, is a frequent contributor to the Japanese literary magazine Bungei Shunjū and a former Wilson Center Guest Scholar. Born in Omura City, Japan, she received a B.A. from Kyōto University (1966) and an M.A. from Columbia University (1970). She is the author of From the City of Washington (1979) and The Starlight over America (1982), both published in Japanese.

A case in point is *Totto-chan at the Window*. Published in 1981, it was written by Kuroyanagi Tetsuko, the popular hostess of three weekly TV variety shows. *Totto-chan* posted sales of 4.5 million copies in its first year, easily surpassing the previous one-year record of 3.6 million—set by *A Japanese-American Conversation Manual* at the beginning of the 1945–52 U.S. Occupation.

Kuroyanagi describes her book as “a series of childhood recollections about an ideal school in Tokyo . . . that combined learning with fun, freedom, and love.” Expelled from public school at the age of six for unruly behavior, the author arrived in 1939 at the Tomoe School, where classes were held in remodeled railroad cars and each pupil worked at his or her own pace. The headmaster shunned traditional subjects for a curriculum that included public speaking, eurythmics, farming, and swimming in the nude. The story ends with the school’s destruction in a 1945 U.S. bombing raid, but an epilogue describes the successful careers enjoyed today by Kuroyanagi and many of her classmates.

Until recently, most Japanese would have frowned on such unorthodox notions of education. *Totto-chan at the Window*, however, appeared just as many Japanese parents, educators, and policy-makers began to question the effectiveness of their public schools. Many criticized the university admissions system, which measures students solely by their performance on

Scene from a 12th-century scroll of The Tale of Genji. Reading spread rapidly after the advent of commercial printing in Japan in 1609.



written entrance exams. Others lamented the classroom emphasis on memorized knowledge rather than creative thinking or analytic ability. Parents complained that teachers no longer regarded their work as sacred, while teachers in turn denounced parents for caring too much or too little about the education of their children. And both parents and teachers charged the Ministry of Education—which approves textbooks, establishes standards, and sets curricula—with being too rigid.

A highly centralized educational system was well suited to Japan 30 years ago. Then, only about 51 percent of all junior high school graduates entered high school, and only about 10 percent went on to universities. A firm grounding in mathematics and science contributed greatly to Japan's postwar industrial progress. Indeed, Japanese students—94 percent of whom went to high schools, 38 percent of whom attended universities in 1980—consistently score at or near the top in international tests of ability in mathematics and science. But in a contemporary economy that demands innovation as much as hard work, Japanese businessmen lament the passive thinking exhibited by their young, college-trained recruits.

Much of *Totto-chan's* success obviously stemmed from the widespread popularity of its author. Even so, it touched a nerve. A flurry of education proposals from the Office of the Prime Minister, and the recent adoption of *Totto-chan* as a third- and fourth-grade textbook, suggest that plans are being made for a school system more attuned to the diverse and economically mature Japan of the 1980s.

Eyes on the TV Set

Now that their country's gross national product ranks third in the world (behind that of the United States and the Soviet Union), many Japanese are assessing the psychic costs of their national drive to success. In *Recommendations on Sensitive Human Relationships*, which has sold more than three million copies since 1982, talk-show host Suzuki Kenji asserts that the Japanese "have forgotten how to use their traditional gentleness and sensitivity, a skill dulled by a postwar society centered on money and materialism." Fewer Japanese, for example, respond to the traditional greeting of *o genki desu ka?* (Are you well?) with *hai, okagesama de* (Yes, thanks to your wisdom and mercy). And when the modern Japanese family eats dinner, it is silent not in deference to an old, established rule of courtesy but because all eyes are on the television set.

A novel that describes the impact of affluence in a different

context is *A Flake of Snow* (1983), by Watanabe Jun'ichi. Iori Shōichirō, a well-to-do architect, spends his time and money chasing two women—one his assistant, the other the wife of a wealthy art dealer. Dinners at expensive restaurants, trips at home and abroad (to the Netherlands and Austria), and scenes of explicit sex occupy much of the novel. Despite his many amorous entanglements, Iori avoids any serious emotional commitments, convinced that “no matter whom one marries, the result will always be the same. . . . Only fatigue descends upon you in the end.” Eventually, his wife and his two mistresses abandon him, and Iori realizes that his own lack of commitment has cost him their affections.

Pearl Harbor Revisited

Watanabe's book sold almost one million copies in 1983. Male readers, nicknamed the “Snowflake Tribe,” seemed to identify both with Iori's high living and his dissatisfaction with marriage. Higher incomes have allowed many men to indulge in expensive extramarital dalliances. And judging from a divorce rate that has doubled since 1960 (but is still only one-quarter that of the United States), broken homes are no longer rare.

More outrageous to the older generation than the Snowflake Tribe has been the behavior of young Japanese in their 20s. Since the mid-1970s, novels on the problems of youth have been perennial best sellers. One of the first to go over the million mark was *Almost Transparent Blue* (1976), a novel by Murakami Ryu that depicts the aimless, drug-filled existence of Japanese youths living near the Fukuo U.S. Army Base in metropolitan Tokyo during the Vietnam War.

Substance abuse—mostly in the form of taking amphetamines and sniffing glue or paint thinner—remains relatively rare in Japan. But the rise in juvenile delinquency is regarded as a national scandal. Since 1973, the number of junior high school students arrested each year has doubled. In *Crumbling Toy Bricks*, which sold 2.8 million copies in 1983, a well-known screen and stage actor named Hozumi Takanobu related his struggle to reform his juvenile delinquent daughter, Yukari. With the help of a police department youth counselor, Yukari's parents finally succeed in stopping her from inhaling paint thinner, stealing motorbikes, and hanging around the more dubious quarters of Tokyo.

Older Japanese, who came of age in a bleak postwar environment that demanded sacrifice, have trouble accepting the comparatively coddled status of youths today. The world cap-

tured in *Somewhat Crystal*, a novel by Tanaka Yasuo that sold one million copies in 1978, remains alien to them. The protagonist, Yuri, is a college girl from a wealthy family who works as a fashion model. Together with her live-in rock-musician boyfriend, she spends her days in chic stores and her evenings in discotheques and restaurants.

At the end of this virtually plotless tale, a convenient glossary defines foreign terms such as *dilettante* and provides the names of fashionable stores in Akasaka where one can purchase Ellesse and Fila tennis wear from Italy, Louis Vuitton luggage from France, and Jaeger sweaters from England. But as Yuri herself remarks, "I feel most comfortable in Saint Laurent or Alpha Cubic dresses." Like many books of the "youth" genre, observes literary critic Nakajima Azusa, Tanaka's work "presented a world with no set standard of values."

Several recent best sellers have also focused on Japan's international role, beginning with a reassessment of the country's behavior during the Second World War. During the immediate postwar years, Japanese accepted complete responsibility for the outbreak of war in the Pacific. The U.S. Occupation authorities vigorously promoted this view, censoring all opinions to the contrary.

A familiar sight on Japan's crowded commuter trains, where, according to a 1984 Asahi poll, 31 percent of all Japanese do most of their reading.



Today, works that bring to light once-suppressed facts and interpretations have found much favor. In 1981, a dry and scholarly account, *The Shōwa History by His Majesty's Senior Subjects*, sold 150,000 copies. Drawing heavily on interviews of Kido Koichi, Emperor Hirohito's Chief Attendant, the book's author cites the strangling effect of events such as the decision by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to "freeze" Japanese assets in July 1941 and to stop U.S. oil imports to Japan in August 1941. Plans for Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, crystalized only in the face of this steady economic pressure.

More controversial was *The Two Fatherlands*, by Yamazaki Toyoko, which sold almost one million copies in 1983. At the outset of this novel, the hero, Amoh Kenji, a *Nisei* (second-generation Japanese American) raised in California, is arrested in Los Angeles after the outbreak of war on suspicion of being a spy. When he protests that he is an American citizen, the policeman responds, "That may be true, but until you bleach yourself white, a Jap's a Jap!"

Amoh is sent to a "relocation center," one of the many wartime internment camps set up in 1942 to confine U.S. citizens of Japanese descent. Later, he joins U.S. Army intelligence and serves as an interpreter at the Tokyo War Crimes Trials (1946–48). At book's end, disillusioned by what he perceives as "victors' justice," Amoh commits suicide.

Asking New Questions

The Two Fatherlands provoked a strong response. Prior to its publication as a book, it was serialized in a weekly magazine, overlapping with zealous Japanese press coverage of the November 1981 U.S. congressional hearings on federal compensation for wartime Japanese-American internees. Televised as a 50-hour series, the program reached millions of viewers. Japanese conservatives, who consider strong U.S.–Japan ties essential, decried the anti-American implications of the numerous scenes showing Americans beating Japanese Americans. In the United States, Japanese Americans objected to the message that their loyalties were divided.

Opinions on the historical accuracy of *The Two Fatherlands* may differ. Yet the popular response shows the long shadow cast by the Second World War. The shadow falls, however, not only on Japan as conquered but also on Japan as conqueror. Japanese face constant reminders that their Asian neighbors have not forgotten their experiences under the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere.

In the summer of 1982, the Chinese filed a vigorous protest when they heard that the Japanese Education Ministry had proposed textbooks that referred to the invasion of China during the 1930s as an "advance." In reality, the ministry itself had little to do with the controversial revisions. The Chinese reaction, however, points to the residual bitterness left by the Second World War.

In the same year, novelist Fukada Yusuke received the Naoki Award—given to the best works of "mass" literature—for his *Merchants under the Blazing Sun*. Fukada writes of the animosity between Japanese trading-company men and Filipino lumber traders in Manila. When the Japanese director of the company sees a rusting anti-aircraft gun on the island of Corregidor, he remarks, "What did the Japanese military leave behind after three years? At best, this rusty gun and the Filipino's hatred." To Frank Satō, the half-Japanese, half-Filipino protagonist of the novel, the overbearing behavior of today's Japanese businessmen often seems no different from that of Japanese occupation troops during World War II.

The Japanese are trying harder to understand their fellow Asians. In 1982, for example, two of the best-selling titles were Korean-language textbooks, designed to accompany an instruction course broadcast on television. Twenty years ago, such reader interest would have been inconceivable.

But 20 years ago, Japan did not play the international role that it does today. Rapid growth in trade has brought the country unfamiliar new global connections—to the Mideast, even to Africa. It has also generated its share of domestic travails. In their variety, Japanese best-selling books supply no universally appealing panaceas—and often spark arguments. What their high sales figures do suggest, however, is that Japanese are ready, after 40 years of self-imposed intellectual isolation, to ask harder questions about themselves and their relationship to the rest of the world.

