

ESSAY BOOK REVIEWS

COMPARING HISTORY

Beasley Versus Schirokauer



The Japanese Experience: A Short History of Japan

BY WILLIAM G. BEASLEY
BERKELEY, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, 1999
XVII + 299 PAGES
ISBN 0-520-22560-0 PAPERBACK



A Brief History of Japanese Civilization

BY CONRAD SCHIROKAUER
FORT WORTH, HARCOULT, BRACE COLLEGE PUBLISHERS, 1993
XI + 323 PAGES
ISBN 0-15-500282-1 PAPERBACK

Teachers offering basic courses on Japan will welcome the recent publication of William G. Beasley's general text. Elegantly written by one of the outstanding patriarchs (b. 1919) of Japanese studies, Beasley's text has the usual index, maps, bibliography, and short glossary found in works of this kind, and almost the same amount of text as Conrad Schirokauer's heavily used but somewhat more expensive work. While James McClain's magnificent new *Japan: A Modern History* (New York, W. W. Norton, 2002, 632 + 92 pages, ISBN 0-393-04156-5, Hardback) certainly should be added to this list in a later review, let us begin by comparing these two authoritative texts.

Certainly both cover a lot of ground in different ways. Because Beasley has some inventive chapters that break away from the usual tendency to divide Japanese history into eras defined by where the capital was located and/or who was the Shogun or Emperor—in particular, “Relations with Asia and Europe, 1500–1700” and “Fifty Years of Foreign Wars, 1894–1945”—his text is less chronologically oriented than Schirokauer's. There is obvious merit to analyzing closely connected foreign policy problems in a single chapter that spans traditional domestic era divisions, and yet Beasley does not always take

advantage of his own format. He quotes, for example, the Showa Emperor's (Hirohito's) famous comment that Japan must “endure the unendurable” by surrendering in 1945 without pointing out that the Emperor deliberately used his grandfather's words at the time of the 1895 Triple Intervention. Since Schirokauer also does not refer back to this unhappy event—but at least gives it more emphasis—both authors miss the chance to link foreign policy issues clearly seen as connected by Japan's ruling elite.

Beasley also puts a bit more emphasis on different historical eras. As might be expected from his other work, Beasley spends relatively more time on the Tokugawa; in my view, his discussion of the 1868 Meiji Restoration seems about as good as an introductory text can get. By contrast, Schirokauer's sixteen pages (including maps and illustrations) on the events leading up to World War II are about twice Beasley's and hence, inevitably, deal a bit more with a dark but exceedingly important moment in Japan's history. This in turn is closely related to the relatively greater emphasis (roughly 11 vs. 7 percent of their texts) that Schirokauer places on the history and culture of Japan since 1945. It is also true, I feel, that Beasley is more inclined than Schirokauer to stress the “high” history of rulers and politics than the “low” history of the common folk, and to see a relatively

successful Japan rather than the portrait of a more conflict ridden and socially coerced society favored by much of the current "revisionist" scholarship.

Schirokauer is also a good deal more teacher friendly. His text (much of which is published in textbooks that also include China) differs from Beasley's in that it has both a useful general time line that compares Japan to China and other world civilizations, and specific time lines for the individual chapters. He helps the reader along by sprinkling illustrations and maps throughout the relevant parts of the text, while Beasley puts only two maps at the end of the book, and has his photographs lumped into two separate sections (fourteen pages total) of admittedly higher quality paper. Beasley's bibliography is presumably more up to date, but unlike Schirokauer's, it has no general bibliographic references, and nothing on post-1945 Japan. Both authors leave out some key (especially revisionist) texts on the postwar period (e.g. John Dower, Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Frank Upham) and Web sites, but Schirokauer is certainly more willing to comment helpfully on a large number of bibliographies and texts, and is thus better able to help a student who wants to know more.

In saying all this, my intent is not to be as negative about Beasley's work as I sound. Having offered for some years now courses both for undergraduates and "in-service" teachers, I have noted my students' interest in the sorts of social (and particularly gender) history that Beasley appears to neglect a bit more than Schirokauer. I also regret that Beasley's great interest in the Tokugawa reinforces a tendency—all too often reinforced by the need of teachers to meet chronologically constructed curricular frameworks—to give only superficial treatment to the extraordinary events that have occurred in the last half century of Japan's fast-moving society. Must we historians cede this territory to those in other disciplines? Yet as a fan of good writing (as I presume we all are), I cannot help but admire Professor Beasley's ability to discuss broad themes in a wonderfully readable fashion. Beasley, indeed, is undoubtedly a bit easier to handle for any general reader more interested in an inspiring overview than a slightly longer chronological narrative featuring specific names and dates.

Both books are thus basic to the field; my point is simply that despite the unfortunate differences in publication date and price that inevitably favor Beasley, each of us who has to choose a text ought to make our own, careful comparisons between two excellent works. ■

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