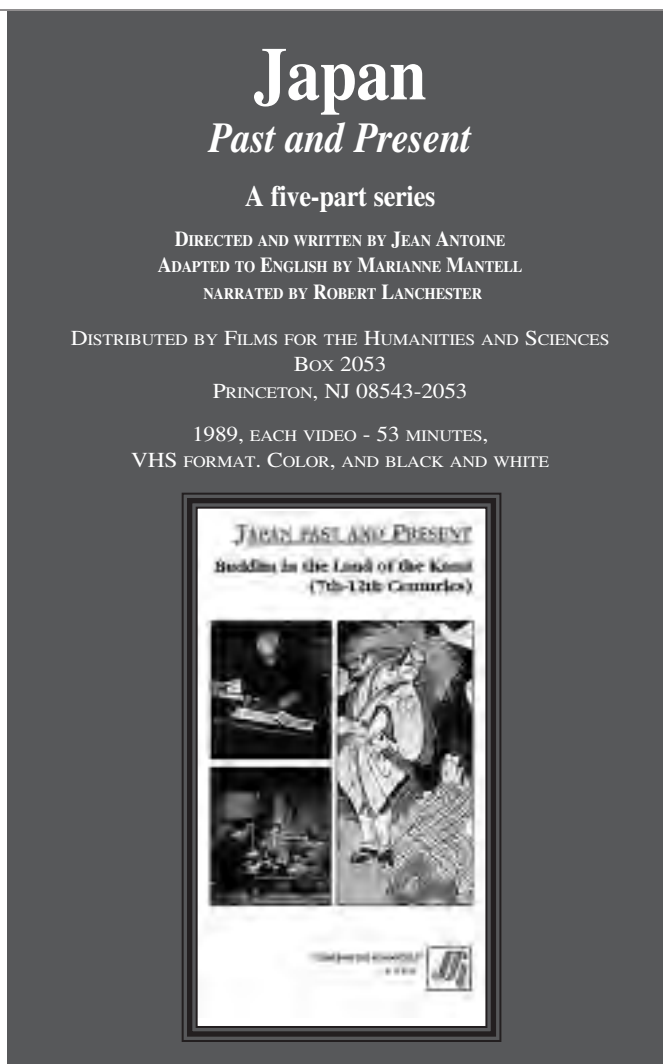


In the fourth video of this series, *The Meiji Period*, Jean Antoine, the writer and director, claims that most Westerners in late nineteenth-century Japan largely ignored the important political, social, and economic changes of the time that would make Japan a powerful modern country because they preferred to focus on the exotic aspects of Japan. Antoine seems to have suffered from the same predilection. His depictions of Japanese culture are highly idiosyncratic, and he frequently stresses bizarre and exotic customs and behaviors to explain how Japanese culture has developed. These videos only briefly concentrate on the central issues; he likes to focus on the peripheries of change. Sometimes the results of his approach are creative, insightful and entertaining, but just as often his technique leaves the viewer confused and dissatisfied.

The series is designed to provide an understanding of how Japanese culture has unfolded from its beginnings to the present and to illustrate how traditions mold modern Japanese. Antoine sees Shintō beliefs and values as the core of Japanese character and claims that other religions and philosophical systems are just overlays of basic ongoing Shintō patterns.

Buddha in the Land of the Kami (7th–12th Centuries), the first segment of the series, traces Japan's cultural development from its beginnings to the twelfth century. The first half of the video discusses the nature of Kami (Japanese gods), a few of the most impor-



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tant creation myths, and the beliefs and values (ritual mortification and purity) of the native cult. The textual narration is illustrated by paintings, shrine architecture, festival parades and dances, ascetics, standing under cold mountain waterfalls, and sumō matches. The video then shifts to the impact Chinese civilization had on Japan from the seventh century onward. Topics covered include the creation of the city of Nara, building of Tōdaiji temple and the Shōsōin storehouse, adopting court music (Bugaku), Chinese dress

(kimonos), football (*kemari*), writing, poetry contests, gardens, and Buddhism.

While I found the video entertaining and informative, I was disappointed by the lack of chronological focus, the very incomplete discussion of Buddhism, and occasional inaccurate or misleading statements. Although Jōmon artifacts are shown, they are not identified as such. No mention is made of the three prehistoric cultures of Japan: Jōmon, Yayoi, and Tomb, although contact with China arose in the second of these periods. The

historic Buddha's life and religious message is not discussed; instead, we get a sketchy examination of the Shingon sect, Japan's most esoteric form of Buddhism. The video falsely implies that the introduction of Buddhism occurred without opposition. On another occasion, the narrator claims Kami are well disposed to humans as long as they are Japanese. Kami may or may not be well disposed to humans, and the nationality of the human is a factor only because of recent nationalistic interpretations of Shintō.

The Coming of the Barbarians (1540–1650), the second segment, begins with a discussion of the feudal values of the Samurai class and vaguely links training of the warrior to Zen Buddhism. The video depicts a warrior general dressing and preparing for battle to illustrate the narration. The video then shifts to Lisbon, Portugal with the narrator commenting on the goals and motivations of Occidental explorers, merchants and missionaries. The scene returns to Japan and covers Jesuit missionary criticism of Japanese beliefs and customs, the creation of Namban art, kabuki, castles, Nōh drama, and the tea ceremony. The trip of four young Japanese Samurai to Europe is depicted as a Jesuit public relations stunt. The video closes with Japan's leading general, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, deciding to repress Christianity which led to Japan's closing itself off to the rest of the world.

Although I found the video informative, I was disappointed. The links between

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Zen Buddhism and the samurai ethos are not sufficiently explored. There are simplistic and unacceptable explanations for important historical events. For example, the narrator claims that Hideyoshi decided to repress Christianity because the Kami told him to do so. There is no discussion of the political, social, and economic factors that influenced Hideyoshi. Most disturbing of all was the video's unrelenting denigration of those Westerners who first went to Japan. Their motives and behaviors were all suspect, and none of the positive achievements of this first cultural encounter between the Japanese and the West were discussed.

The Age of the Shōguns (1600–1868) asks the question of why the Japanese people have such strong consensus on most matters while they are so insular and uncomfortable with outsiders. The video's answer is that during era of the Tokugawa shōguns Japan almost completely isolated itself from the rest of the world and created a very unified society. The narrator notes that there were four main social classes: samurai, farmers, artisans, and merchants in order of their theoretical importance, but only presents the lifestyles of the first two of these classes.

The video briefly discusses the career and policies of Tokugawa Ieyasu, Shōgun from 1603 to 1616, who pursued a policy of expansion and greater contact with the West, but also favored the suppression of Christianity. Following Ieyasu's death, the Tokugawa gradually cut off all contact

with the world except for ties with the Chinese and the Dutch, who were confined to Deshima Island in Nagasaki Bay. The narrator remarks that the new shōguns were much influenced by the moral code of Chinese Buddhism which encouraged the virtues of order, wisdom and loyalty. The video notes that the Japanese learned much about business from the Chinese traders they encountered even though the Chinese were treated with suspicion and closely watched. The work of Korean potters of the village of Arita, who were enslaved in two Japanese invasions of Korea during Hideyoshi's rule, is briefly depicted in the video. They made fine kaolin pottery which the Japanese sold to the Dutch.

Following a brief section on the lifestyle and limitations placed upon the peasant class, the video focuses on the Dutch presence in Japan. The Dutch were permitted limited trade through Nagasaki, and every four years a small delegation made a trip to the shōgun's capital of Edo where they were frequently forced to play the role of buffoons for the entertainment of the Shōgun and his court. "These poor specimens from the West," who would do anything to succeed at business, are compared to the cultured refinement of a Taiyu, a high ranking courtesan of the red light district of the big cities of Japan. After commenting on the role and refinement of courtesans, the video focuses on other aspects of urban culture during the Tokugawa era: the making of woodblock prints, elaborate tattooing, and the kabuki theater. The video closes

with scenes of a samurai committing suicide by cutting open his stomach in a ritual manner (*seppuku*).

The most serious error in *The Age of the Shōgun* is the claim that it was Chinese Buddhism which stressed order, wisdom, and loyalty that the Tokugawa shōguns found so valuable in creating a stable political and social order for feudal Japan. Actually, the guiding ideology was Neo-Confucianism, which is not even mentioned. I was also surprised that little attempt was made to discuss the pattern of life of the artisan and merchant classes. The seeming implication is that the entertainment quarters of the big cities adequately illustrated the lives of those classes.

The Meiji Period (1868–1912) opens with illustrations of the singing of *kembu* (war-like songs of the Satsuma clan) and an examination of a folk dance of a lion which traditionally cleansed the air and entered private homes, perhaps as a police spy during Tokugawa times, to determine if anyone was engaging in illegal Dutch studies. The narrator describes young Samurai of Chōshū like Yoshida Shōin who were dissatisfied with Tokugawa policy in the 1850s and were demanding reforms.

Change was soon forced upon the Japanese as Americans and Russians separately demanded an end to Japan's isolation. The Tokugawa government opened Japanese ports, built housing, and a red light district for foreigners and tried to minimize contacts between Japanese and the barbarians.

The Westerners flaunted their technology, and soon the Japanese began to modernize. The video is almost half over before the Emperor Meiji is installed on his throne and the Meiji era begins. The video very briefly touches upon a number of changes in society such as the Emperor's encouragement of Westernization, the crushing of Saigō Takamori's revolt, ending bath houses where the sexes bathed together, invention of the ricksha, and new restaurants where meat is served.

The new government's seizure of Hokkaidō, the suppression of Ainu culture, and the colonization of the island by Japanese settlers are given greater time in the video. The Japanese, in their desire to modernize and Westernize the island, allowed Christianity to be preached, and so the Russian Orthodox Church and Catholic French Trappists, who excel in making biscuits and butter, are briefly discussed. The scene then shifts to Nara where a young Japanese man takes his bride to a Western hotel to make her aware of beds, chairs and champagne. The narrator claims that most Westerners are like Pierre Loti. They are interested only in the exotic aspects of Japan and not in its creation of a new political system with a constitution, an industrial economy, new educational system, and powerful army and navy. The video ends with a few comments on Japan's victory in war over first China, and then Russia, and its creation of a colonial empire with its annexation of Korea in 1910.

This segment of the series was particularly disappointing

because it failed to discuss why the 1868 Meiji Restoration occurred. Although disaffected Samurai of both Satsuma and Chōshū were mentioned at the beginning of the video, it was not at all clear how or why they led the revolt which undermined the Tokugawa regime. No mention was made of the fiefs of Tosa and Hizen. Of the battles fought during the revolution, only the battle for Hokkaidō, which occurred long after the issue had been decided, is included. Several times the argument is advanced in the video that the merchant class led the modernization effort; most historians assign that role to the lower samurai. Although the creation of a new political system with a constitution, industrialization, a modern military, Westernized education, and colonialism are all briefly addressed, the real focus is placed upon changes in popular culture.

The Essence of Being Japanese (1912-), the fifth segment, begins with an eight-minute segment of newsreel photos of Japanese disasters alternating with scenes from a modern play or dance segment of moaning and murmuring dancers wrapped around trees, falling down, carrying one of the dancers on a litter, and attacking another with bamboo poles. The newsreel photos cover such events as the 1923 Earthquake, soldiers marching in China, the coronation of Emperor Hirohito, fighting in World War II, the Atomic Bomb, and the landing of MacArthur to start the Occupation of Japan. Although it is

clear that the modern dance scenes are making some kind of symbolic statement about Japan's road to disaster, the narrator makes no comment about these scenes. I found the beginning of this segment bizarre.

The video then attempts to portray what life would be like for the average contemporary Japanese from the time the infant is first presented to the kami of the local Shintō temple by a female relative, thirty-two days after birth. The commentary and pictures focus on experiences at different states of life: childhood, school, college, work, marriage ceremonies, owning a car, enjoying cherry blossoms, watching sumō, hanging out in a hotel lobby, visiting a Fashion (sex) hotel, and visiting a crematorium.

This video, except for the strange opening eight minutes, provided a satisfactory picture of many life experiences of most Japanese, but was not very interesting or enlightening. The most memorable scenes are those at the crematorium where the closest male relative has the privilege of placing the first of the departed's bones in the urn which will be taken home. Not much time is devoted, however, to how funerals are organized and carried out in Japan. A few of the narrator's lines are likely to spark controversy and criticism. For example, at one point the narrator claims that the main goal in life of a young woman in her twenties is to get married. Later, he argues that Japanese do not deserve their reputation as lovers and preservers of nature. Rather, the

point is made that the Japanese destroy nature without remorse and tend to create hotel lobbies to symbolically replace the world they destroy.

Antoine's blend of music, pictures, narration, filming of festivals, and even use of actors makes for an interesting viewing experience. He approaches his material from a sympathetic point of view, and covers a lot of facets in Japanese culture in each video. Antoine avoids the lecture format of so many videos by allowing the narrator to be heard, but not seen.

Each of the videos can be purchased separately. In spite of the sometimes serious deficiencies, inaccuracies, and biases noted in the videos above, the first three can be used as interesting and useful supplements in courses at the

high school and college level. However, since no textual materials or study guides have been prepared to accompany the videos, it would be imperative that the teacher have a good understanding of Japanese history and culture and that students have read a solid historical account of the time period before seeing the series. The least useful of the videos is *The Meiji Period*, while *The Essence of Being Japanese* is neither very stimulating nor informative. I could not recommend either of these two videos in the series. ■

JOSEPH LAKER is a Professor of History at Wheeling Jesuit University. He received a Ph.D. in History from Indiana University with a specialization in modern Japan. He has traveled widely in Asia.

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