

BOOK REVIEWS

Japan Since 1945

The Rise of an Economic Superpower

By Dennis B. Smith

NEW YORK: ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, 1995
180 PAGES + BIBLIOGRAPHY + INDEX

Explaining Japan's stunning rise from the ashes of World War II to economic superpower status by the 1970s remains one of the more daunting challenges for the student or teacher of Asian development. Few observers who witnessed the war-ravaged landscape of Japan in 1945 forecast the country's quick return to normality, let alone prosperity, and only the most optimistic in the country dreamed of a dramatic resurgence in economic performance. Dennis Smith's *Japan Since 1945* provides a succinct summary of the economic and political activities that underlay the remarkable reconstruction and expansion of the Japanese industrial plant.



This short book begins with an overview of Japanese history to 1945, identifying prewar developments in parliamentary democracy, social structure and economic activity, and the wartime destruction that wreaked such havoc across the country. The study continues with a description of the period of American occupation, 1945–1952, which the author clearly sees as pivotal to Japan's reemergence, and a very interesting summary of the “search for political stability” that characterized the 1950s. The remainder of the book is divided into three chapters, which cover the economic boom of the 1960s, the oil-driven crises of the 1970s, and the period of Japanese ascendancy in the 1980s. There is a brief account of the economic difficulties of the early 1990s.

To a certain extent, this book is already dated. The continuing Japanese economic trials, though typically over-stated in the Western press, have dampened the excitement—and the concern—about Japan's continued economic growth and influence in several key economic sectors. Books on the “rise and fall” of the Japanese economic miracle are already in press and, no doubt, more will come.

Japan Since 1945 does not offer any striking new theories of Japan's economic growth. Smith explains Japan's development largely in terms of historic developments: the activities of the shogunate in the Tokugawa era, the remarkable transformations of

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the Meiji “revolution,” the economic stimulus provided by World War I and the early years of World War II, the impact of the American occupation on the education system and other sectors, and numerous other events and processes. The author endeavors not to exaggerate the significance of the Japanese “miracle,” making a concerted and successful effort to place Japanese growth within the context of Western trade liberalization, military spending, and the importation of industrial technologies. He also highlights, appropriately, the impact of Japanese management and industrial systems, and the close relationship between the government and the *keiretsu* (the huge conglomerates that dominate the Japanese economy). Dennis Smith is particularly interested in the interplay between politics and economic development. He devotes considerable attention to the aspirations and activities of the nation's prime ministers, and seeks to document the role of politicians in shaping industrial growth and diversification.

Dennis Smith's survey of Japan's economic development will be a welcome addition to a senior high school or undergraduate university library. It is, by its very nature, an overview, and does not seek to provide detailed assessments of the complex issues at hand. As a result, there is little of the technical jargon or baffling statistical tables that generally characterize works of economic history. Moreover, the blend of political and economic analysis demonstrates very ably the synergy that exists in Japan between these two key aspects of the Japanese order. *Japan Since 1945* is easy to read and unusually accessible, although Smith unfortunately decided to devote little space to fleshing out the personalities and characters of the key political and economic figures that he discusses. Teachers and students seeking a concise, accessible and reliable summary of Japan's economic transformation would do well to start here. ■

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