Japan: Why It Works, Why It Doesn’t: Economics in Everyday Life

Edited by James Mak, Shyam Sunder, Shigeyuki Abe, Kazuhiro Igawa

UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII PRESS, 1998
219 PAGES

Japan: Why It Works, Why It Doesn’t evolved out of a 1995 visit to Japan by American economics professors James Mak and Shyam Sunder. Arriving in Japan with little understanding of the society, Mak and Sunder began asking questions of their Kobe University hosts (including their co-editors, Shigeyuki Abe and Kazuhiro Igawa) about what they saw around them. Many of these questions became the titles of the various essays that make up the book. By focusing on everyday life, the book explains some interesting aspects of the internal dynamics of Japan’s economy.

Each of the essays is around eight pages long, and they are organized into three sections—Living, Work, and System. The section on living discusses aspects of life and society, while the essays on work cover aspects of the business world. “System” refers to the economic structures of life in Japan and includes contributions on the keiretsu (Japanese industrial conglomerates), health care, and banking. The essays are wide ranging and tackle topics from “Why So Many Gifts?” to “Do the Japanese Work till They Drop?” to “Why Do Doctors Prescribe So Many Pills?” The book does not offer comprehensive coverage of Japan; instead it gives an up-to-date introduction to a random variety of specific topics about the intersection of the society and economy of Japan. Designed for high school or college students, the language is intentionally simple, and technical language is kept to a minimum. The authors often discuss their own experiences, impressions and opinions. The writing is engaged and accessible.

While the book has many strengths, there are a few weaknesses. Japan: Why It Works, Why It Doesn’t does not, for example, answer either of the questions posed in the book’s title. Portions of the answers are provided in the various essays, but the authors do not provide an overarching analysis that addresses these fundamental—and fascinating—questions. As is evident by the short length of many of the chapters, coverage of individual subjects is brief and sometimes too simplistic for an academic audience. In a number of cases, the essays do not address the questions posed in the title, but rather provide a brief overview of the subject. Most importantly, there is a decidedly American focus to the examples and comparisons used in the essays. This makes the book of more limited interest to non-U.S. audiences or American audiences seeking broader comparisons. Nonetheless, there is much of value in Japan: Why It Works, Why It Doesn’t and it will be of interest to those eager to learn more about some of the different aspects of economic life in Japan.

Carin Holroyd

CARIN HOLROYD teaches International Business at the Williams School of Business at Bishop’s University, Lennoxville, Quebec. Previous to this appointment, she studied and taught Asian studies at the University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand. She holds a Master of Science degree in Japanese Business Studies and is completing her doctoral thesis on Japanese trade and investment.