

Modern Japan

A Historical Survey (Fifth Edition)

BY MIKISO HANE AND LOUIS G. PEREZ

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Reviewed by Jason Morgan



Revisiting this classic textbook in its fifth edition, I am reminded of how well the late Mikiso Hane and, now, Louis Perez have told the complex story of modern Japan. Throughout this volume's long life (the first edition, by Hane, appeared in 1986), critics have rightly focused on the way in which people—both high and lowborn, insiders and the marginalized—figure prominently in the book's narrative. This is, indeed, one of the

book's perennial strong points and is doubtless a big reason for *Modern Japan's* enduring popularity. But there are two other inter-related strengths that should recommend this textbook to students and educators at the secondary and postsecondary level.

First, both Hane and Perez have the ability to tell the intricate story of Japanese history in crisp, well-paced prose. Even when treating the extraordinarily complex network of shifting alliances, false friendships, and transnational intrigue that characterized much of Japanese politics, military strategy, and diplomacy in the late 1920s and 1930s, the narrative is never bogged down by the difficulty of the subject matter. Breaking key episodes down into paragraph-sized acts, the authors are able to cadence their fact-rich presentation into compelling historical storytelling. One secret to the book's readability, I think, is the book's famous attention to people in history. Whenever rhetorically possible, "the government" or "the army" are not the actors; rather, Lieutenant-General Ōshima Hiroshi (1886-1975) champions a military alliance with the Axis powers (305), or Prime Minister Hara Kei "allowed his minister of home affairs, Tokonami Takejirō (1867-1935)," to organize "labor contractors, their workmen, and ruffians to serve as strikebreakers," supported by "right-wing nationalists such as Tōyama Mitsuru" (240). People drive the action, and both people and their actions are effortlessly woven into the wider tapestry of Japanese and world history. Students are likely to respond well to this kind of personalized writing, making *Modern Japan* an ideal textbook for the secondary level and beyond.

The second strength of this book is the sheer amount of information packed into it. There is a wealth of facts, figures, names, dates, and statistics in *Modern Japan*. Because of Hane and Perez's abilities in expository history writing, though, readers are unlikely to realize just how much they are learning as they work their way through this book, making it ideal not only for students in

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Japanese history courses, but also for teachers, who can rely on Hane and Perez to provide plenty of background information for lessons on virtually any aspect of modern Japanese history. Chapter 14, "War and Defeat," for example, contains some of the finest textbook writing about the Pacific War that one is likely to encounter. But it was only after I had finished the chapter that I realized how many admirals, generals, lieutenants, politicians, aircraft, ship names, island names, battles, and casualty lists had been covered. Teachers will especially appreciate this felicitous writing style, as they can assign this book to students confident that they will be exposed to an argosy of well-ordered historical information.

The fifth edition is largely the same as the fourth, with the exception of Chapter 16, "The Postwar Years (II): Political Developments after Independence," which contains ten new pages largely on the Koizumi, Aso, Hatoyama, and Kan administrations; and Chapter 18, "Cultural Developments," which has twenty-two new pages mostly on the March 11, 2011, "three strikes" disaster in Tōhoku. At times, these new pages are a touch exuberant—especially the political update, as Perez is clearly a Kan Naoto partisan and is given to taking the LDP too severely to task for their shortcomings. For example, the postal service may have been badly run, but surely "bloated political charnel house" needs some qualification (396). But overall, the new inserts are sorely needed in the aftermath of what has been a tumultuous five-year interval since the fourth edition was published in 2009.

One other quibble is that the pre-*bakumatsu* chapters, although well-done, are too short. Future editions might expand their Edo coverage so that *Modern Japan* could be used for early-modern Japan courses, too. There are precious few textbooks that cover the Tokugawa period, so even fifty more pages on the two and a half centuries between Sekigahara and Perry's arrival would be a boon for college teachers looking for more background to the Meiji Restoration than is usually found in general works.

None of these minor cavils prevent me from recommending this book wholeheartedly, though, to educators, students, and the general reader who is looking for what is simply the best textbook on the history of modern Japan. ■

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