

# Modern Japan

## *A History in Documents*

By JAMES L. HUFFMAN

OXFORD, UK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2004  
155 PAGES, PAPERBACK, ISBN: 0-765613-36-0

There is no shortage of fine textbooks on the history of modern Japan. But all—from the old standards authored by Peter Duus, Mikiso Hane, and Kenneth Pyle, to more recent volumes from Andrew Gordon, James McClain, and Conrad Totman—follow the same familiar formula. All are long, content-rich, chronological narratives written in the dispassionate, authoritative voice of a detached, “objective” historian. As is typical of textbooks, the interpretation is done for the student reader, who is expected to be a more-or-less passive consumer of the historical information and analysis provided. Primary sources, the raw materials of history, are implicitly deemed supplemental by such traditional textbooks: it is left to the discretion of the instructor to identify, assign, and distribute primary materials as additional course readings. With the vast majority of textbooks—including all of those commonly used in modern Japanese history classes—students can only experience the practice of history vicariously.

Part of the inspired “Pages from History” series from Oxford University Press, James Huffman’s *Modern Japan: A History in Documents* is a welcome and very promising departure from the time-honored textbook format. Although some might characterize the volume as a collection of primary sources covering Japan’s trajectory from the Tokugawa period (1600–1868) to the present, Huffman’s book is no run-of-the-mill anthology of historical documents. Rather, with ample introductory material, substantive captions and sidebars, and a variety of illustrations, *Modern Japan: A History in Documents* is an exciting new take on the textbook, offering students both the sources and the context necessary to make their own reasoned historical interpretations.

Huffman’s book begins with a short, lucid preface introducing primary sources and how they can be used by historians. This methodological discussion is basic, though far from condescending, and alerts students to many approaches that instructors are liable to take for granted (“biased materials often give us as much insight as balanced materials do” (8)). The pitfalls of using translated sources—which make up the vast majority of the passages in this book—are, unfortunately, not addressed.

The basic format of the chapters in the body of the book is consistent. All begin with broad introductions which, in Huffman’s hands, are models of clarity and conciseness. These are followed by a series of short primary-source passages, each individually introduced by a paragraph or two of historical context and information about the author. Sidebars to the text contain short, pithy quotations, explanations of terms, events, or people mentioned in the primary sources, and a variety of other forms of information, from economic statistics to poetry. The design is easy to understand, effective, and thoroughly “user-friendly,” and is about as close to hypertext as



## U.S.-CHINA TEACHERS EXCHANGE PROGRAM

The National Committee on United States-China Relations is now seeking applications for an exchange program for teachers in American and Chinese schools. This is an unusual opportunity for schools and districts wishing to begin or to strengthen Chinese language and culture programs and for teachers wishing to live and teach in China.

Now in its tenth year, the program has placed American teachers from across the country in “key” secondary schools throughout China—in Beijing; Dalian (Liaoning); Hefei (Anhui); Hohhot (Inner Mongolia); Luoyang (Henan); Suzhou, Changzhou, Yangzhou, Nanjing (Jiangsu); and Chengdu (Sichuan). We anticipate that many of the same schools on the Chinese side will participate in the next year of the program.

The American teachers in China teach English as a foreign language. The Chinese teachers, all of whom teach English as a foreign language in China, will be prepared to teach Chinese history, language, and culture and/or English as a second language at participating American schools. The National Committee sponsors orientation programs for participating teachers in the U.S. and China during the summer before the exchange year.

The National Committee pays the salary of visiting Chinese teachers and the transportation of American teachers. Participating American teachers will receive partial salary replacement from the National Committee and host Chinese schools during their exchange year.

For more information and an application package, please write to the Teachers Exchange Program, National Committee on United States-China Relations, 71 West 23rd Street, New York, NY 10010.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

could possibly be achieved in a printed format. The book is well illustrated (regrettably only in black and white) with photographs, woodblock prints and other artwork, postcards, magazine covers, editorial cartoons, and numerous other images.

Huffman does an adept job of balancing his chronological coverage of modern Japanese history. One background chapter on Tokugawa is followed by a "picture essay" on the *bakumatsu* period of 1853 to 1868. A feature of all the "Pages from History" volumes, this picture essay (consisting mainly of captioned prints, photographs, maps, and the like) provides an unconventional—but ultimately somewhat unsatisfying—view of the crucial years before the Meiji restoration. Compared to the richness of the written primary source materials in the rest of the book, this primarily visual section seems rather thin. The Meiji period is covered in two chapters (broken sensibly at 1890), while one chapter deals essentially with Taishō Democracy (1912–1930) and another with the early Shōwa period and World War II. Two chapters treat the postwar decades: one covers the Allied Occupation and the era of high-speed economic growth, the other describes Japan's political, financial, and social rollercoaster since 1970.

The written primary sources that Huffman arrays here are stunning in their variety and depth. Among the materials that Huffman quotes are diaries and memoirs, newspaper articles, government documents (laws, treaties, etc.), travelers' accounts, passages from period textbooks, and fiction, including a good deal of poetry. Many documents are provocative and would provide good jumping-off

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points for discussions. A number are also very compelling emotionally—the testimony of a Filipina "comfort woman," the journal of an A-Bomb survivor, the account of a victim of Minamata disease—and would resonate strongly with students. The length of the primary source quotations—the vast majority fall somewhere between 250 and 500 words—ensures they are more than just historic sound-bites, and are well attuned to the short attention spans of most contemporary audiences. This strikes me as a textbook that students would actually read and engage with.

Huffman's historiographical approach is very much "standard" throughout, as one would expect of a textbook. His coverage of social history is strong and he integrates the history of women and left-wing political groups admirably. In what is a relatively compact volume (211 pages of text), some topics are inevitably (and necessarily) passed over or given minimal attention, although the major themes of Japanese political, economic, and cultural history are all addressed here. As can be said of many of the competing textbooks on modern Japan, more attention to Japan's geographical context and to Japanese interactions with Asia would have been welcome.

*Modern Japan: A History in Documents* is an unconventional take on the traditional textbook, and one that offers tremendous possibilities to instructors, especially those whose classes tend to be more discussion-oriented and less "top down." While some teachers might prefer to use *Modern Japan* as a supplemental source in addition to a more familiar narrative textbook, it could easily stand on its own in advanced high school and introductory college courses, as well as in National Consortium for Teaching about Asia seminars. The innovative format of Huffman's book empowers students to form their own interpretations and actively "do history," a goal we all espouse but which can be frustratingly elusive in the classroom. I look forward to trying it out with my own students. ■

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