

# Routledge Handbook of Japanese Culture and Society

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Educators seeking a text to introduce their students to Japan will find the *Routledge Handbook of Japanese Culture and Society* unparalleled in both breadth and depth. The *Handbook* includes twenty-two chapters from leading scholars of Japan that cover an amazing range of topics, including Japanese language and politics, religion, law, architecture, food, pop culture, aging, civil society, sexuality, education, and ethnicity. These topics are delineated with three major headings: “Social Foundations,” “Class, Identity, and Status,” and “Cool

Japan.” The book’s editors purposefully designed it for nonexperts, and each chapter is relatively short and places discipline-specific theoretical concerns in the background. This makes the text accessible to both high school and college students. The *Handbook* can also serve as a significant beneficial resource for teachers who are engaged in learning about Japan.

Although each chapter can be read independently, several themes run throughout various chapters, such as the importance of breaking down stereotypes, the way culture is constructed, and the challenge of social change. These are themes that are valuable not only for teaching about Japan but also for teaching about any society or culture; too often the concept of culture is taken for granted without analyzing how culture is formed and contested. Furthermore, images of Japanese society in America remain filled with stereotypes and outdated information that must be questioned.

Several essays in the *Handbook* present significant challenges to common conceptions about Japan. Robin LeBlanc begins her chapter about gender politics in Japan by recounting a story of how she consistently has to confront “a seemingly impermeable set of stereotypes about Japanese gender relations” and continues by arguing that women have more agency in Japan than they are often thought to have and that Japanese men also struggle with gender roles (116). William Kelly writes that individual sports are extremely popular in Japan in order to balance out group-oriented depictions of Japanese life. In a moving chapter about minorities in Japan, Richard Siddle argues that “while clearly not the most ethnically diverse society in the world, Japan is far from mono-ethnic” (150). He states that anywhere from three to six million people in Japan can be considered part of a minority group and that many are day-laborers who engage in work that is considered *kitsui*, *kitanai*, and *kiken* (difficult, dirty, and dangerous). The image of a monocultural Japanese nation is, however, not always a misperception held by outsiders, it is also an image projected by the Japanese state. Various chapters show that discussions of minorities do not appear in school curricula and that the state often denies their existence. In his chapter on language politics, Gottlieb points out that Japan

has frequently prohibited the use of other languages, such as Ainu and Okinawan, as a way to enforce Japan’s image as a monocultural nation.

Japan as a monocultural country is a cultural construct, and a key topic throughout the *Handbook* is how culture is constructed and contested. Much that is considered traditional Japanese culture is of recent invention. Consider Ted Bestor’s chapter titled “Cuisine and Identity in Contemporary Japan,” where he highlights the fact that *nigiri sushi*, a slice of fish on rice, was only invented in the mid-nineteenth century. Furthermore, cuisine that is often considered distinctly Japanese has frequently been introduced from outside Japan. Mark Mullins, whose chapter focuses on religion in Japan, describes the invention of State Shinto after the 1868 Meiji Restoration, and Merry White articulates how patterns of expected Japanese family life were created as part of modern nation-building efforts during the same early Meiji period. Issues surrounding aging in Japan are also culturally constructed, as Leng Leng Thang argues in her chapter on this topic. Much discourse about contemporary challenges in Japan focus on the fact that the Japanese population is aging.

Aging is but one of many serious social changes and challenges facing Japan that the *Handbook* explores. Peter Duus argues that the breakdown of postwar institutions that used to take care of workers for life have led to completely different conceptions of work and has fostered a large number of part-time workers. David Slater shows how these same postwar institutions played a role in increasing the status of the working man in Japan but that with the more recent end of lifetime employment, workers are developing identities outside of the office. Furthermore, these recent changes in employment dynamics are leading to increased status for entrepreneurs and to deep frustration among many youth who cannot find meaningful work.

Teachers will also find the entire section of the *Handbook* that focuses on “Cool Japan” useful because it analyzes aspects of Japanese culture, from sports to architecture, that often motivate students’ interest in Japan. Susan Napier’s chapter on *manga* and *anime* is particularly relevant; it provides excellent insights into the cultural context in which these art forms are created by highlighting their roots in older ways of storytelling in Japan, as well as how they embrace themes like tragedy. These points will help teachers utilize such media in the classroom as a doorway for understanding broader issues in Japanese culture and society.

American discourse about contemporary Japan often tends either to focus on the military alliance or to paint Japan as a country in decline. The *Handbook of Japanese Culture and Society* is refreshing because it illustrates the diverse ways in which the people of America and Japan interact and, furthermore, shows that despite popular images to the contrary, Japan is not a “society in disarray” (6). Japan has one of the lowest crime rates of industrialized countries, its population enjoys the longest lifespan, its people worry less about financial burdens than those in most countries, and it operates under the rule of law. While exploring serious and disturbing problems that face Japan, the *Handbook* challenges teachers and students to view these challenges in a larger, comparative context. ■

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