

Understanding Japan: A Cultural History

By Professor Mark J. Ravina

Produced by The Great Courses (Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company/Smithsonian, 2015)

Twelve CDs with printed guidebook, six DVDs with printed guidebook, or download with digital guidebook

Reviewed by Eric G. Dinmore

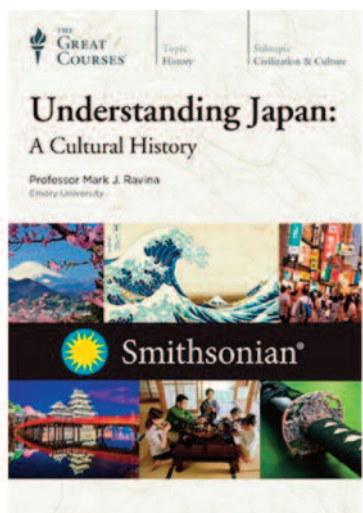
While serving as President of the American Historical Association, William Cronon of the University of Wisconsin-Madison delivered one of the most inspiring addresses in years at that organization's 2013 annual meeting in New Orleans. Rather than promote an emerging subfield or present from his impressive original research, Professor Cronon used his time to focus on deep concerns he held about the diminished profile of professional historians in public life

and the decline in public funding for history. To counter these trends, he urged his audience members to “come back from the cutting edge,” avoid “self-referential insider language,” and persuade the wider public of history's importance and fascinations. Further, he reminded his fellow historians of the importance of good storytelling and passionate undergraduate teaching as keys “to keep asking what the past means and why ordinary people should care about it.” Professor Cronon called upon professional historians to join forces with other storytellers, including journalists and filmmakers, and to embrace the digital revolution as an opportunity to (re)connect their research with the concerns of outsiders.¹

Since well before Professor Cronon's AHA presidential address, Mark Ravina of Emory University has worked hard to connect the uninitiated with the field of Japanese history. Professor Ravina has written compelling “insider” histories of Japan under the Tokugawa Shogunate (1600–1867), including a monograph on eighteenth-century warlord economic and demographic management, from which I profited while preparing for my comprehensive examinations as a doctoral student.² However,

his best-known written work is probably *The Last Samurai*, his biography of Saigō Takamori, the Meiji Restoration oligarch and eventual leader of the largest samurai rebellion the modern Japanese state faced in 1877.³ The work has undergone several translations since its publication over a decade ago, and it continually appears on undergraduate syllabi, including two of my own at Hampden-Sydney College. Professor Ravina began his biography before he learned about the Tom Cruise film of the same name, but the film's release offered him several opportunities to engage with the wider public about differences between the historical Saigō and Watanabe Ken's Saigō-inspired Hollywood character. In essence, he was doing precisely what Professor Cronon urged of his fellow historians in his address by reaching out and appearing on cable television programs and other mass media. Since *The Last Samurai*, Professor Ravina has taken on other outreach work, including a term as president of the Southeast Conference of the Association for Asian Studies (SECAAS), a branch of the national AAS that brings Asian studies to a traditionally underserved region of the United States.

Professor Ravina's most recent, and potentially furthest-reaching, outreach effort to date is his recording of twenty-four half-hour lectures, *Understanding Japan: A Cultural History*, which now stands in my field as one of the finest realizations of Professor Cronon's idea of storytelling for the public interest. *Understanding Japan* was released in 2015 as part of *The Great Courses* series by The Teaching Company in cooperation with the Smithsonian Institution. Listeners can opt to download audio or video versions of the series, or they can order physical CDs or DVDs. Many readers will already be familiar with *The Great Courses*, either from personal experience or from glancing at The Teaching Company's frequent advertisements in *The Economist* and similar publications; for those who are not familiar, the series offers an array of generally high-quality lectures that can be rewarding introductions to uncharted realms of knowledge. The breadth and depth of coverage is similar to the *Very Short Introduction* series published by Oxford University Press, and *Great Courses* topics range from “Cognitive Behavioral Therapy” to “Tchaikovsky—His Life and Music.” Unfortunately for Asia scholars and teachers, historical and humanities coverage overwhelmingly favors European and North American topics. In the “History” category, for example, one can find only a handful of



Asian (not to mention African or Latin-American) topics drowning in a sea of titles on the ancient Mediterranean, European diplomatic history, American military history, and the like.⁴ Fortunately, as the first *Great Course* solely focused on Japan, Professor Ravina's *Understanding Japan* helps set a high bar for accessible Japanese and Asian history, and I sincerely hope that it will encourage The Teaching Company to offer more titles that educate about Asia.

As its title implies, *Understanding Japan: A Cultural History* deftly interweaves a narrative of Japanese history in its regional and global contexts with a variety of “cultural” topics. The historical coverage encompasses the full sweep of Japan's past, from Neolithic Jōmon culture through the twenty-first century, though premodern history (about ten lectures) receives more detailed attention than modern history after the 1868 Meiji Restoration (five lectures). Slightly under half of the series focuses on cultural topics, which include linguistics (Lecture 4), theatrical traditions (Lecture 12), architecture and gardens (Lecture 13), poetry (Lecture 15), family life (Lecture 20), culinary arts (Lecture 21), and cinema (Lecture 23). Because I am personally familiar with many of the visuals that Professor Ravina references, and because I prefer to listen to audiobooks and lectures on my iPod or in my car, I listened to the CD release of *Understanding Japan* to prepare for this essay. However, I would recommend that those who are new to Japanese archaeology, architecture, and art view the DVD or video download versions instead, because they feature artworks from the Smithsonian collections, as well as timelines, maps, and other helpful additions. Both the CD and DVD versions include a 184-page guidebook that: outlines major lecture points (the download versions come with a digital guidebook), writes out Japanese words and proper names, offers suggestions for further reading, and asks open-ended questions. One can navigate all twenty-four lectures without ever opening it, but those who are unfamiliar with Japan will especially find the guidebook helpful.

What can newcomers to Japanese studies gain from the storytelling in *Understanding Japan*? Perhaps the most important story, which Professor Ravina begins to narrate in his introduction (Lecture 1), is that Japanese history is best viewed as a cyclical process where periods of globalization alternated with isolation. As I have to reiterate every semester in my undergraduate teaching, we need to get past the tired assumption that Japan was a society isolated from the rest of humanity until Commodore Matthew Perry sailed his “black ships” into Uraga Harbor in 1853 and supposedly awakened the Tokugawa Shogunate to the outside world. Professor Ravina correctly points out that, in fact, Japan had gone through other periods of intense globalization prior to what he calls its “third globalization” in the mid to late nineteenth century (Lecture 17). *Understanding Japan* presents two such periods in particular: the foundation of the *ritsuryō* state on the Yamato Plain according to Tang Chinese models in the sixth through eighth centuries (Lectures 3 and 5), and the Ashikaga Period that spanned the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries, when Japan existed as a decentralized state next to the powerful Ming Dynasty in China and the Chosŏn Dynasty in Korea (Lecture 10). The *ritsuryō* state imported Chinese characters, porcelain technology, Buddhism, Confucian rituals, and Tang-style legal codes and land allotments, just to name a few examples. Ashikaga Era warlords, *wakō* pirates, and merchants maintained a complex web of relations and commercial exchanges with the Ming and Chosŏn governments, as well as new entrants into East Asian waters such as Portugal, Spain, and the Netherlands.

In between these periods of globalization, Professor Ravina presents two periods of relative isolation. The “first isolation” occurred during the ninth through thirteenth centuries, when the Heian court ruled in Kyoto while samurai power grew in the provinces and in Kamakura (Lectures 6 and 7). The “second isolation” stretched from the mid-seventeenth century through the mid-nineteenth century, when the Tokugawa house held hegemonic power in Edo (present-day Tokyo) for fifteen generations and conducted diplomacy according to the famous anti-Christian “closed country” policy (Lectures 11 and 14). Although Japan retreated from overseas relations during these periods of isolation, Professor Ravina notes that both periods were generally peaceful and saw the refinement of distinct Japanese cultural traditions, including vernacular poetry, culinary practices, popular religions, theatrical forms, and samurai and commoner storytelling. Importantly, he also means “isolation” in a relative sense of the term. In my favorite lecture of the whole *Understanding Japan* series (Lecture 16), which foregrounds woodblock printing during the Tokugawa period, Professor Ravina shows how the techniques and perspectives of Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) changed over the course of his career as he familiarized himself with European visual art after the eighth Tokugawa shogun Yoshimune allowed secular Dutch-printed works into Japan. Hokusai's most famous print, *The Great Wave* (ca. 1830), further broke with established Tokugawa Era conventions by presenting its subjects—the wave, Mount Fuji, and the fishermen—from the perspective of an outsider at sea looking inland toward Japan. Thus, although late Tokugawa Japan was legally “isolated,” innovations based on outsider views of the world were entirely possible.

A second important story that Professor Ravina tells in *Understanding Japan* is that samurai history never revolved around a set code of *bushidō*, the so-called “way of the warrior,” and that samurai roles in Japanese society constantly evolved. This story resonates with my own challenges in presenting samurai history to undergraduates, colleagues outside my field, friends, and family members. Generally, such individuals respect and regard samurai as honorable warriors, akin to popular perceptions of knights in European history. Yet they seldom realize that their preconceptions mostly come from films, *manga*, “fan” translations of Tokugawa Period works like *Hagakure*, and the 1900 work by Nitobe Inazō that coined “bushido” in English, *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* (Lectures 14 and 18). Professor Ravina strives to correct this popular myth in several lectures that demonstrate how the reality for samurai was far more complex and dynamic. At first, samurai actually held little political authority. When they arose as a form of privatized military power after the abandonment of the ritsuryō state’s conscript army in the early ninth century, samurai were loosely knit bands of petty nobles charged with maintaining private estates for their wealthier cousins in Kyoto. Only centuries later, after a short-lived attempt by Taira no Kiyomori (1118–1181) to seize political power through marriage into the Imperial family in the 1180s, did the Minamoto, under Japan’s first shogun Yoritomo (1147–1199), establish a more lasting system of samurai power in the provinces. The Minamoto and their successors acknowledged the Imperial court’s authority, but they directly took charge of providing their warrior vassals support from the land. Although many institutional changes would still take place over the ensuing centuries, Yoritomo established the *bakufu*, or “tent government,” an evolving samurai political form that would last into the nineteenth century (Lecture 7).

Though this political history is important and is further developed throughout *Understanding Japan*, Professor Ravina’s lectures are particularly skillful at illustrating how samurai notions of heroism, masculinity, loyalty, and virtue were fluid and often a far cry from any static “bushido” ideal. In the famous medieval epic, *The Tale of the Heike*, which traces the rise and fall of the Taira house during the Genpei War (1180–1185), warriors from both the Taira and Minamoto sides of the conflict display almost superhuman acts of individual valor as a measure of their heroism. Yet the epic clearly and repeatedly contrasts the rugged, provincial Minamoto from Japan’s eastern provinces with the more courtly, refined ways of the Taira, who had ruled in Kyoto up to the outbreak of the war. Warriors still deferred to courtly ways in the twelfth century (Lecture 7). Portraits of warrior virtue changed, however, and they offered alternative visions of masculinity. Professor Ravina illustrates these alternatives through a discussion of the legendary accounts of Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159–1189), the younger half-brother of Yoritomo, and his burly sidekick Benkei (1155–1189), a rustic warrior monk. Yoshitsune and Benkei formed a medieval dynamic duo, where the slight, androgynously beautiful Yoshitsune relied on his wits and tactical skills to strike down his opponents, while Benkei was an enormous brute of a man who symbolized provincial power (Lecture 7). *A Chronicle of Great Peace (Taiheiki)*, which was written two centuries after *The Tale of the Heike*, demonstrated how samurai virtue further changed by the fourteenth century. Kusunoki Masashige (1294–1336), the main hero of the account, repeatedly used retreats, ruses, and other cunning maneuvers that might popularly be associated more with ninjas than “bushido.” Yet Masashige legitimized his guerrilla tactics by employing them in the name of loyalty to his lord, Emperor Go-Daigo. Loyalty had become the paramount samurai virtue by Masashige’s time (Lecture 9).

Professor Ravina demonstrates that by the time of the Tokugawa Shogunate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, concepts of samurai virtue changed even more. The “great peace” of the era meant that warriors were no longer in the business of fighting wars; rather, they became officials, magistrates, and servants to their lords in Edo and provincial castle towns. They also became writers, and as Professor Ravina notes, almost all our descriptions of warrior conduct came after the civil wars of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries had stopped. Tokugawa period works such as *Hagakure* tended to wax nostalgically and impractically about the end of warrior ways, while other works turned to Confucianism and legitimized samurai rule as an expression of that fixed social status’s moral superiority over others. Probably the most famous Tokugawa episode in samurai history, the 1702 vendetta of the forty-seven *rōnin*, brought into view another moral dilemma which had developed under a shogunate that outlawed private vendettas but still upheld loyalty as a cardinal samurai virtue. Scores of intellectuals and theatergoers throughout the period debated about the *rōnin*, and whether it was more virtuous for a samurai to uphold the laws of the state by eschewing private violence or to demonstrate loyalty to his lord through blood vengeance (Lecture 14). Whatever their answers may have been, the

fact that such a debate was both possible and popular indicated just how drastically samurai status had changed since its origins nine centuries earlier.

Great Courses offerings such as *Understanding Japan* target “lifelong learner” audiences with little background knowledge foremost, but secondary school and undergraduate teachers with more experience in Japanese or Asian history can also benefit from listening. The lectures offer quick points of entry into new teaching fields, as well as creative strategies on how to divide the complex topic of Japanese cultural history into appealing and digestible chunks. On the creativity side, I particularly applaud Professor Ravina’s decisions to introduce political and intellectual topics through the lens of cultural history. As alluded to earlier, Professor Ravina uses his biography of Hokusai as a vehicle for illustrating how Tokugawa control policies eroded in the early nineteenth century (Lecture 16). Similarly, his lecture on gardens contrasts aesthetic and philosophical principles in the Pure Land and Zen sects of Japanese Buddhism, and it shows how the sects informed landscape and tea garden architecture (Lecture 13). A lecture on family life in Japanese society offers a creative point of entry into a number of historical topics, such as marriage politics in the Heian court or the institution of formal patriarchy across all social classes under the *koseki* system of Imperial Japan after the Meiji Restoration. It then becomes a means to introduce contemporary social concerns, such as declining fertility rates, the breakdown of the post-1945 lifetime employment system, and the aging of Japanese society (Lecture 20). I also appreciate Professor Ravina’s frequent uses of familiar analogies to translate complex topics to the uninitiated. When describing the Zen Buddhist principles of a quiet mind and detachment from rationality, he alludes to how skilled tennis players, golfers, and other athletes achieve better results when they follow through as they strike a ball, even though the followthrough might seem irrational (Lecture 8). When he recounts the story of the 1837 Osaka revolt led by students of Ōshio Heihachirō, a one-time samurai police lieutenant who quit the force out of protest over governmental malfeasance, he likens Ōshio to Frank Serpico, the whistleblowing New York police officer whom Al Pacino portrayed and helped make famous in the 1970s (Lecture 16).

My one criticism of *Understanding Japan* is that in the effort to make room for detailed treatment of cuisine, ancient *Kojiki* mythology, and other underrepresented topics, some important moments in modern history are given short shrift. Professor Ravina adequately covers topics such as the Meiji Restoration (Lecture 17) and the postwar Japanese economic “miracle” (Lecture 22), but to the uninitiated, the early twentieth century might appear as a quick leap from the Meiji Era’s revolutions to World War II. Some attention is given to liberal thinkers such as Nitobe Inazō, the diplomat and author of *Bushido*, and the pro-business internationalist Shidehara Kijūrō (Lecture 18), but listeners do not hear about crucial debates over interpretation of the Meiji Constitution or Japan’s parliamentary politics during the interwar years. Granted, these topics have been amply covered in print scholarship on twentieth-century political history, but newcomers may get the mistaken impression that modern Japan had nothing but authoritarian government until 1945. This criticism is a minor-level quibble, though; on the whole, *Understanding Japan* features one of the best storytellers in the field presenting persuasive interpretations of Japanese cultural history and explaining to a wider public why this history should matter and fascinate. If there are a few gaps in coverage, perhaps The Teaching Company will see fit to commission a lecture series on modern Japan that is of the same high caliber as Professor Ravina’s.

NOTES

1. William Cronon, “Storytelling,” American Historical Association Presidential Address, January 4, 2013, New Orleans, www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/presidential-addresses/william-cronon, accessed 7-16-2016.
2. Mark J. Ravina, *Land and Lordship in Early Modern Japan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).
3. Mark J. Ravina, *The Last Samurai: The Life and Battles of Saigō Takamori* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2004).
4. “The Great Courses,” www.thegreatcourses.com, accessed August 19, 2016.

ERIC G. DINMORE is Elliott Associate Professor of History at Hampden-Sydney College. Since earning his PhD from Princeton in 2006, he has focused his research on connections between the human-built and natural environments in twentieth-century Japan. Most recently, he has published articles on large dam projects in post-1945 Japan in *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, *Water History*, and the edited volume *Environment and Society in the Japanese Islands: From Prehistory to the Present*.