

The Rise of Modern Japan

BY LINDA K. MENTON ET AL.

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It's amazing how, post-9/11, the great cultural debate over whether or not we need a global curriculum has just gone away. We need one, and it's hard to find anyone who still wants to argue that European and American history are sufficient for American students. But where are the teachers with the background to teach non-Western classes? And where are the resources to help them? *The Rise of Modern Japan* is an important new textbook that anyone from the Asian Studies neophyte to the Asian Studies expert could use to teach a high school or even a college class on modern Japan.

The text, created by a team of educators and Asian Studies specialists, is designed for a semester class and comes with a helpful teacher's manual and a CD of Japanese music. Chapter one, designed for a five-week study, gives a quick (five pages!) overview of Japan before 1580, devotes twenty pages to Tokugawa Japan, and then goes into more detail on the Meiji period. Chapter two, also designed for five weeks, covers Japan from 1912–45, while Chapter three covers 1945 to the present.

The Curriculum Research and Development Group has provided just about everything that even the most novice high school teacher would need to teach a full class on Japan. The text of *The Rise of Modern Japan* is barely 250 very readable pages, over half of which are questions for discussion, pictures, charts, activities for students, extension activities for further research, and bibliographies for further reading. The teacher's manual also gives considerable help to the teacher, including possible responses for all the text's questions and activities.

The reading level of the text is well within the range of most high school students. Indeed, since I teach Far Eastern history to mostly bright twelfth graders, I sometimes worry that the text is too easy. For instance, it defines words such as *dynasty*, *cavalry*, *artillery*, and *conservatism*, and I find myself wincing at how my students might react to such condescension. Some of the activities in the text are also perhaps quite appropriate for ninth or tenth graders, but I wouldn't use them with seniors. For this reason, perhaps the activities should have been included in the teacher's manual and not the text itself.

In my experience the most constructive sources for history classes are primary sources, not history textbooks. Especially with excellent online resources such as Columbia University's *Asia for*



Educators, I've recently been on the verge of dumping history texts entirely. *The Rise of Modern Japan's* authors seem to share my love for primary materials, and much of the book, perhaps one third, is devoted to primary texts.

For instance, the section on World War II is thirty-seven pages long. Eleven of these pages give the historical background, about eight are maps, pictures, graphs, and art, and fully eighteen are dedicated to

diaries and first-person accounts. We hear accounts from seven different servicemen and four different civilians. All battles are summarized in a chart that makes up less than half a page, yet a kamikaze pilot's reminiscences take up four pages. These choices are refreshing and put *The Rise for Modern Japan* heavily in the social history category.

Many of these primary sources are particularly powerful and would work well with students. Two of my favorites are the five-page account of a survivor of the Tokyo firebombing and the four-page account of "Examination Hell."

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BOOK REVIEWS



If I were mentoring a teacher without much experience in Asian studies who was charged with teaching a non-Western class, I would do two things.

First, I'd give them
The Rise of Modern Japan.

While I can't imagine experienced teachers very often using the text's activities (half the fun of teaching is making up your own), the extension activities at the end of each of the book's nine sections are superb. These often give suggestions for major research outside of class. For instance, the World War II section recommends having students research the Nanjing massacre, and it lists half a dozen books, videos, and articles where they can start. There are eight other excellent suggestions in this section alone.

These extension activities make *The Rise of Modern Japan* an excellent resource for a project-rich class. The text itself gives enough background to enable the teacher to turn the students loose on the projects. The further reading suggestions at the end of each section are also excellent for students and teachers alike.

I also appreciate the authors' emphasis on art and music, two of the best ways to teach about culture, ones often neglected in textbooks and classrooms. For instance, there is a two-page spread of powerful artwork on the atomic bombings. The CD of musical selections is also a nice addition, in my experience, to the teacher's arsenal. The liner notes have translations of all lyrics, and the text and teacher's manual sometimes give useful suggestions on using this music in the classroom.

Web sources are a fluid medium, and so perhaps the authors decided against including any in this text or in the teacher's manual because they could quickly become out of date. Nonetheless, I am disappointed that *The Rise of Modern Japan* totally ignores the excellent Web resources now available.

If I were mentoring a teacher without much experience in Asian studies who was charged with teaching a non-Western class, I would do two things. First, I'd give them *The Rise of Modern Japan*. Second, I'd give them the URLs to *Asia for Educators* (<http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/>), *AskAsia* (<http://www.askasia.org/>), and the *Asian Educational Media Service* (<http://www.askasia.org/>). They'd have everything they'd need for an excellent course.

The Rise of Modern Japan won the 2003 Franklin Buchanan Prize for the best contribution to Asian Studies curriculum. It's easy to see why. It's an excellent new resource. ■

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