

*Japan and the Shackles of the Past*. R. Taggart Murphy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

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Historians assume that the past is a critical key to understanding the present, but economists and political scientists need convincing. It is from that perspective that *Japan and the Shackles of the Past* moves from Japan's earliest documented eras to a detailed examination of the problems and struggles of our age, focusing on elements that persist. Murphy argues that culture and structures developed by Japanese elites to solve problems in the past have become "shackles" or constraints on healthy development. Murphy's specialty is contemporary economic policy and his insights in that area are substantial, but this ambitious project fails to deliver its larger promises.

The first three chapters are historical surveys: pre-1600, Early Modern, and Imperial Japan. Being brief, they are naturally limited to what Murphy considers essential components with clear connections to contemporary society. This distorts the history — reducing complexity, eliminating social and economic history almost entirely — and gives an ahistorical impression of inevitability. Murphy eschews citations, but does include some references for each chapter: the scholarship on offer here is mostly a quarter century old or more. The notable exception is studies of sex and sexuality, which are well-represented and current. The cultural history emphasizes elite Japanese values that were neither continuously present in the interim nor unchanged by the transition to modernity. This is the first appearance of a weakness throughout the book: a focus on elite classes and policymakers that erases the agency of the vast majority of Japanese. For example, he argues that Meiji era religious policy obliterated the existing spiritual

practices of the Japanese people, leaving them existentially unmoored with a weak sense of higher purpose.

The fourth chapter moves past World War II, but replicates debates of the 70s and 80s, relying on Chalmers Johnson, Karel von Wolferen, and even a discussion of the preternaturally "seductive" (102) character of the Japanese based on Takeo Doi. Murphy draws on some more recent scholarship here, but only works that have won Pulitzer prizes. Chapters five and six bring the story up to the 1980s, and could have been written contemporaneously, being largely based on sociology, political science, and pop culture analysis from that time. There is a lot of "every society does [x] but Japan does it much more" language which doesn't really alleviate the sense that this is an exceptionalist analysis at heart. (222)

The last five chapters are topical: Finance and economics, business, society and culture, domestic politics, and international relations. There is a kind of vague progression through time from chapter to chapter, as well, but immense overlap and repetition between them. The last two chapters constitute a third of the book's length, an immensely detailed survey of the admittedly complicated political history of the last quarter century, including regional and global context. Within chapters, chronology is more or less observed, but dates are rarely attached to events or people, so it feels unmoored at times. The vagueness is exacerbated by the decision to eschew notes that might help readers anchor names and events, and more importantly, the author's claims. Murphy often leaves out relevant exceptions or caveats, then brings them into the discussion pages later without clarifying that the earlier point is complicated by the addition, much to the frustration of an expert reader and probably the confusion of inexperienced ones. It might have served the book better to have the detailed political history before the other topical chapters,

to provide a framework. In fact, the whole book might benefit from being read backwards by chapters.

Part Two of the book makes a solid case for Japan suffering from failures of leadership and systems, hangovers of the early post-war solutions that brought Japan so successfully out of the malaise of defeat. Murphy's specialty is finance, trade, and currency, and when those are put in the context of political battles, leadership changes, and structural social shifts, it can be quite illuminating. Although he disparages Chalmers Johnson and other institutionalists, his own analysis is situated in that tradition, focused on lifetime employment, bureaucratic government, corporate structure, and campaign finance. He tries to make a cultural argument stick but few of the pre-modern connections stand up to serious historical scrutiny.

There is an interesting discussion of nationalism from the Meiji era (1868-1912) forward and its role in imperialism and right-wing movements as well as a rationale for a focus on economic growth. Murphy also points out the militaristic and imperialistic family backgrounds of many elite postwar Japanese politicians. By the end of the book, however, only extreme right-wing nationalism seems to matter, though he also credits the Japanese with an amazing talent for social cohesion and purpose that somehow was not forged in the 20th century. Shockingly, immigration is not in the index, nor mentioned until the last pages, despite Murphy's extensive attention to Japan's labor system, including sex workers. Japan's demographic constriction is a long-standing issue, and analysis of, for example, the attempt to alleviate it by re-immigrating the descendants of emigrants would be a perfect case study for the roles of nationalism and culture in shackling policy.

Murphy's prescription for Japan to break free of the shackles of infantilizing American security arrangements and economic malaise is for a Japanese de Gaulle to "normalize" Japan as

an independent state with a fully functional military, somehow liberalized but stable economy, featuring a purposeful masculinity without rolling back the gains of Japanese women. This can not be done by an Abe Shinzo-like retrograde nationalist who will offend regional powers or engage in corrupt dealings, however. Implausible, and unlikely to work if it did happen, it is nonetheless reasonably consistent with the shackles of social structure, international relations, and political gridlock as Murphy describes them.

Aside from immediately relevant international relations, this is a Japan-centric discussion, with minimal comparisons or global perspective. As an historian, I cannot recommend this book except as a way to catch up on the intricate political circumstances of the last thirty years or so, and as an introduction to currency and finance as factors in modern history. Novice readers and students would be particularly ill-served by the gaps, unsettled chronology, and often outdated scholarship presented.

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