

Book Review

Modern Japan: A Very Short Introduction

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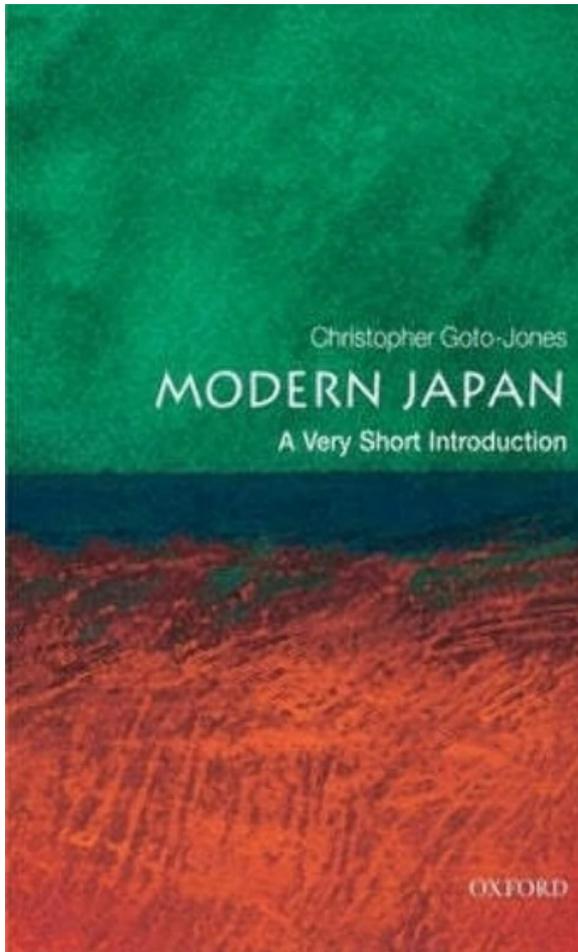
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Modern Japan: A Very Short Introduction

by Chris Goto-Jones

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Chris Goto-Jones is the dean of the humanities at the University of Victoria. His book presents modern Japan as a captivating fusion of tradition and hyper-modernity, challenging Western perceptions. It highlights Japan's economic success and cultural influence while emphasizing its enigmatic nature to outsiders. Through examples like FIFA World Cup ads, it illustrates Western struggles to reconcile Japan's heritage with its technological prowess. Ultimately, Japan's journey from isolation to modernization serves as a narrative of negotiation and adaptation in the face of Western influence, offering insights into broader global themes of cultural and social change.

The author sets out to explore the complex concept of "modernity" through the lens of Japan's history, challenging common assumptions and offering fresh perspectives. He delves into the dynamic interaction between tradition and modernization, highlighting Japan's unique path and the diverse responses of its people to the forces of change. From the myth of Japan's

isolation to the post-war period of reconstruction, the narrative unfolds, revealing the intricate negotiations between old and new, East and West. He questions what it means to be “modern”, beyond mere temporal proximity to the present, and probes the core elements of modernity, from industrialization to political systems to cultural consciousness. Through this exploration, the reader is invited to reconsider their understanding of modernity and its manifestations, recognizing the complexity and diversity inherent in the modern experience. Putting up a chronological account of important events the book illustrates Japan’s encounter with the modern world, imperial revolution, Japan at war, economic miracle and Japan’s contemporary quest for normalcy.

The author provides challenging conventional narratives and insightful analysis of Tokyo’s modernization process, offers a convincing re-evaluation of Japan’s history from the Tokugawa shogunate to the Meiji Restoration.

The book begins by challenging the widely held belief that Japan’s quick modernization was solely sparked by Commodore Perry’s arrival in the country in 1853. Instead, the author places Perry’s influence in the context of Japan’s earlier exchanges with the West and its intricate internal sociopolitical structure. The author painstakingly examines the Tokugawa era’s power consolidation under Tokugawa Ieyasu, the adoption of the Sankin Kotai system to promote national identity and economic advancement, and the difficulties the shogunate experienced in retaining authority over feudal lands. The Tokugawa shogunate fell apart during the crucial bakumatsu years of 1853 to 1868, and Perry’s entrance served as a spark for both internal dissension and outside pressure. Emperor Meiji oversaw Japan’s modernization as the Meiji Restoration, propelled by anti-bakufu groups like Satsuma and Chōshū as well as internal unrest, brought an end to Tokugawa control.

The author offers a thorough analysis of Japan’s shift throughout the chapter, placing outside influences within the country’s internal dynamics and historical context. Through emphasis on crucial elements like the sankin kotai system, limitations imposed by social hierarchy, and the function of anti-bakufu factions, the writer provides a thorough comprehension of the intricate reasons propelling Japan’s modernization endeavours.

Japan’s evolution was moulded by the complex interactions between tradition and modernity, which the author skilfully explains in his second chapter, a fascinating voyage through the revolutionary Meiji Restoration. The author depicts Japan’s audacious steps towards modernization in vivid detail by weaving together a complex web of historical occurrences

and ideological changes. The author tracks the passionate quest of equality on the international arena and the unwavering dedication reflected in Emperor Meiji's Charter Oath. The demise of the samurai class and the creation of a centralised government system, which represents Japan's embrace of change in the face of traditionalism, are at the heart of this investigation. The reader is taken to a realm of social transformation and political turmoil where revolutionary passion meets the weight of tradition via the eyes of important personalities like Kido KoŃin and Saigo Takamori. Japan's determination to preserve its cultural legacy in the face of Western influence is demonstrated by the reworking of the samurai mentality as a national emblem. Beneath the surface of national pride, the narrative delves into Japan's existential quest for self-definition, navigating the establishment of Yasukuni Shrine and the emergence of a vibrant civil society. With meticulous attention to historical detail and a lyrical narrative style, the author skillfully navigates the contours of Japan's identity crisis, inviting readers to ponder the enduring tensions between tradition and progress that continue to shape the nation's trajectory.

Further, the subsequent section, the narrative delves into Japan's shift towards militarism and imperialism during the early 20th century. Against a backdrop of economic turmoil and political unrest, Japan faced internal struggles and external conflicts that shaped its trajectory. Following the Great Depression of 1929, Japan experienced soaring unemployment and social unrest, leading to political violence and challenges to the established order. The assassinations of Prime Ministers Hamaguchi Osachi and Inukai Tsuyoshi marked a turning point, signaling a shift towards greater military influence in governance. The author succinctly examines Japan's expansionist ambitions, including actions in Manchuria and the Fifteen Years' War with China. It also delves into Japan's conflicts with Western powers, culminating in the attack on Pearl Harbor and its defeat in World War II. The narrative explores Japan's imperial aspirations and its relationship with conquered territories, alongside internal dissent and eventual surrender following significant defeats like Midway and Saipan.

The fourth section offers a concise overview of Japan's journey from the aftermath of World War II to the dawn of the 21st century. Following Japan's defeat, Emperor Hirohito's broadcast initiated a period of US-led occupation focused on demilitarization and democratization.

Significant reforms ensued, including the dissolution of the military and economic changes such as land reforms and rights guarantees for marginalized groups. However, the onset of the Cold War led to compromises on reforms, with a shift in US priorities towards

countering communism. The subsequent economic boom, fueled by US involvement in the Korean War, propelled Japan into rapid growth, accompanied by societal shifts like the emergence of consumer culture and youth movements. Despite economic success, challenges such as gender inequality and environmental degradation persisted. Cultural debates over Japan's identity and its relationship with the West played out, with figures like Mishima Yukio embodying dissent against Western influence. The 1990s brought economic downturns and crises, prompting deeper reflections on Japan's identity amid societal disillusionment. Despite these challenges, Japan navigated its postwar complexities, grappling with questions of modernity and national identity while maintaining its role as a significant global player.

In the last section, on Japan's Pursuit of International "Normalcy", author offers a nuanced exploration of Japan's post-World War II trajectory, focusing on its efforts to redefine its role on the global stage. The narrative delves into the complexities surrounding Japan's quest for "normalcy" in international relations, examining both domestic challenges and external perceptions. One of the strengths of the chapter lies in its examination of the multifaceted debates within Japan regarding its international identity. By highlighting the tensions between calls for greater global involvement and concerns over historical legacy, the author provides valuable insights into the intricacies of Japan's postwar psyche. However, while the chapter effectively outlines Japan's aspirations for a more assertive role in global affairs, it could benefit from a deeper analysis of the broader geopolitical context. A more thorough exploration of Japan's relationships with neighboring countries and major world powers would offer readers a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing Japan on the international stage.