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**Victoria Lyon Bestor & Theodore C. Bestor, with Akiko Yamagata.
Routledge Handbook of Japanese Society and Culture. New York:
Routledge. 2011.**

John McCreery Ph.D.
The Word Works, Ltd., Yokohama, JAPAN, jlm@wordworks.jp

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Victoria Lyon Bestor & Theodore C. Bestor, with Akiko Yamagata. *Routledge Handbook of Japanese Society and Culture*. New York: Routledge. 2011.

According to its editors,

This Handbook is intended as an interdisciplinary reference work for a broad international audience of those interested in the culture and society of contemporary Japan—university-level readers, professionals, and the general reading public seeking accurate information and thoughtful perspectives. A conscious strategy in the Handbook has been to place contemporary Japanese social and cultural phenomena in the spotlight and to keep disciplinary or theoretical perspectives in the background (2011:1).

The editors may indeed have succeeded in creating an interdisciplinary reference that provides keen insight into the culture and society of Japan, but the work produced for this reference does not, strictly speaking, constitute a “handbook.” Indeed, this work would be far more aptly titled if it were called “Essays on Current Topics in Japanese Culture and Society,” a title which, though the text might sell fewer copies if billed as such, would be easy to praise as a worthy effort. It would also more accurately reflect what the editors have truly created: a compilation for the scholar of Japanese studies, one who is already familiar with the basics of Japanese culture. In this text, the reader will find a compendium of articles by authorities on topics that are now in the spotlight for those who study Japan from humanistic or social science perspectives. All submissions contain recent observations not found in earlier works on Japan and are, thanks to the editors’ strategy of backgrounding disciplinary or theoretical perspectives, blessedly free of jargon. Those who will benefit most from this book are advanced undergraduate or graduate students who are already familiar with older work on Japan, or their teachers who need to update course curricula. Other readers, misled by the “Handbook” in the title into thinking the book provides an accessible summary of basic information about Japan, may find themselves baffled.

This text is not a beginner’s “handbook.” There are no introductory or elementary explanations for beginning readers regarding the nature of the country’s culture, its economic system, or its demographics. I note, for example, that none of the twenty-two chapters is explicitly titled “Economics” or “Demography.” These topics are briefly addressed in Peter Duus’ summary of modern Japanese history in Chapter One, “Shōwa-era Japan and beyond: from Imperial Japan to Japan Inc.” Such fundamentals are also frequently alluded to in, for example, chapters in which the 1991 collapse of Japan’s economic bubble is cited as marking an important turning point in Japanese history; economics and demographics are also discussed with respect to Japan’s low birthrate and aging society (which is now the most rapidly aging in the world). There are, however, no tables or charts to which a reader can turn to trace the course of Japan’s GDP, birth and mortality rates, or other basic demographic statistics. The book does contain some basic or introductory information, but it is buried in essays that have to be read in their entirety to find it, and several chapters assume a familiarity with Japanese customs and institutions or even recent events that readers who are not scholars of Japanese studies may lack. It is for this reason, precisely, that “Handbook” misleads. The term “handbook” suggests simple,

authoritative answers to basic questions about Japan; instead, however, this book assumes basic knowledge of Japan and contains scholarly debates on topics that range from perennial to trendy.

The editors might argue that basic information on the Japanese economy, demography, customs, and habits is readily available to anyone with access to the Internet and who has learned the art of the Google search. (A search for “Japanese government statistics” will, for example, lead to the website of the Statistics Bureau of Japan, within which a wealth of data is available.) Similarly, the editors might (correctly) assert that the fundamentals of Japanese culture abound in other, more commonly reviewed sources, such classics as Ruth Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, Chie Nakane’s *Japanese Society*, or Yoshio Sugimoto’s *An Introduction to Japanese Society*, in which traditional concepts as *ie* (the Japanese household enshrined in Meiji law) or *uchi/soto* (inside/outside, with reference to a strong group orientation said to be peculiarly Japanese) are explored. The editors may have felt that producing an “interdisciplinary reference work for a broad international audience” did not necessitate a review of such basic material and that by “[keeping] disciplinary or theoretical perspectives in the background” that they had, in fact, produced a widely accessible handbook. This reviewer would argue, however, that the text, while highly successful, is not a “handbook” of basic Japanese studies and that referring to it as such does somewhat misrepresent its content.

Despite any confusion precipitated by the book’s title, however, many chapters of this book generally successfully take a scholarly look at Japan and its contemporary culture and society. The book is divided into three parts: “Social Foundations,” “Class, Identity, and Status,” and “Cool Japan.” The book’s twenty-two chapters cover history, politics, language, education, religion, law, urbanization, social class, gender, family, gays, race and ethnicity, people on the margins, aging and social welfare, civil society, architecture, TV and film, manga and anime, popular music, sports, Japan and East Asia, and Japanese cuisine. Part I, “Social Foundations” includes chapters on history, politics, language, education, religion, law, and urbanization. Chapter One, by Peter Duus, is a small masterpiece of social and narrative history. (Any reader of the book who is not already familiar with Japan will find this chapter to be critical to an understanding of Japanese history and culture.) Chapter Two, “Four Cultures of Japanese Politics,” by David Leheny, in contrast, opens with a bit of already dead news: the discussion of “the victory of the ideologically driven but partly progressive Democratic Party of Japan (DJP) in 2009 over the long-ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).” While this victory was hailed as a major turning point in Japanese politics (and those familiar with T.J. Pempel’s *Regime Shift* or other accounts of the “1955 system” that transformed Japan into what was, in effect, a one-party state for most of the second half of the twentieth century will understand why), Leheny’s discussion of a 2010 debate about DPJ prime minister Yukio Hatoyama already seems archaic in 2011, following the fall of Hatoyama’s successor, Naoto Kan. Nonetheless, Leheny’s four “cultures” (in fact, four themes): “There they go again,” “Reformers vs. anti-reformers,” “Nationalism,” and “The power of the people” (NGOs and civil society) are an interesting framework for thinking about politics in Japan. (Again, an understanding of basic facts about Japanese government—i.e. that it is a constitutional monarchy, a parliamentary democracy, with a Diet composed of upper and lower houses, or how parties and factions are organized—is presumed).

The focus of Chapter Three, “The Cultures and Politics of Language in Japan Today,” by Nanette Gottlieb, is language ideology (with respect to issues surrounding literacy, rather than language *per se*). We learn that multilingualism is, for Japanese educators, largely a local issue, to be addressed through local efforts, largely in central Japan, where factories employ many

workers whose children's first languages are not Japanese. The implications of literacy on the development of new technologies (e.g. word processors and cell phones) are a second major theme, and government efforts to promote among its citizens the acquisition of English as a second language, which is seen as essential to prospering in a globalizing world, are a third. *Kanji* (Chinese characters) and the *hiragana* and *katakana* syllabaries are mentioned as a source of difficulty for those striving to become literate in Japanese, even for Japanese children. (Unfortunately, no examples of *Kanji* are provided to show those who know no Japanese what is being talked about or how these scripts are used, as such knowledge is presumed).

Chapter Four, "Japanese Education and Education Reform," by Roger Goodman, focuses on issues raised in the 1980s by the Special Committee on Education (set up by then-Prime Minister Yashiro Nakasone) and the implications of Japan's falling birthrate on secondary and higher education. The new information here is the observation that secondary education, which remains largely public, has been less affected by shrinking student bodies than have *post*-secondary institutions, the majority of which are private and many of which were established as profit-making institutions during the bubble economy. One particularly interesting consequence of the shrinking student community is that among those who seek post-secondary education, there is a growing polarization between those students who must still endure "examination hell" to get into the handful of the most prestigious universities, which remain important pathways for entrance into Japan's professional elite and those for whom slacking is the norm, who can easily gain admission to the country's many second- and third-tier institutions, since those institutions must now accept almost any warm body in an effort to maintain even a minimum of student enrollment. Again, the focus of the chapter is on policy and currently hot topics. Basic information about the Japanese system of public schooling, in which pre-school is divided into *hoikuen* (day care centers) and *yochien* (kindergartens) and in which elementary, middle and high schools are organized along "6-3-3 lines," imposed during the [U.S.] occupation of Japan are not presented, and no mention is made of the Prussian-style uniforms, morning formations, and other relics of pre-War militarism, all of which are still alive and well in Japanese public schools and might appropriately be discussed in a "handbook" on Japanese culture.

Most of the remaining chapters in the book exhibit, to greater or less extent, the pattern illustrated by Chapters Two through Four: the topics are important; many observations are fresh, yet much that might have been included in a fatter, more comprehensive, more genuine "handbook" is missing. I close with two notable exceptions. Chapter Eight, "Social Class and Social Identity in Postwar Japan," by David Slater and Chapter 15, "The New Prominence of the Civil Sector in Japan," by Akihiro Ogawa, deserve special mention for the richness with which the topics are contextualized. Ogawa's observation of the way in which the Japanese state mobilizes and exploits volunteer citizen groups and NPOs to fill gaps in the sociopolitical fabric is thought-provoking, indeed. By adding these two chapters to Peter Duus' history in Chapter One, a reader new to Japanese studies will come away with a good, basic understanding of Japanese society.

John McCreery, Ph.D.
The Word Works, Ltd., Yokohama, JAPAN
jlm@wordworks.jp