

11-1-2015

Kingston, J. *Critical Issues in Contemporary Japan*. New York and London: Routledge, 2014.

Douglas M. Miller

Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington, dqs@uw.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Miller, Douglas M. (2015) "Kingston, J. *Critical Issues in Contemporary Japan*. New York and London: Routledge, 2014.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 7 : No. 1 , Article 23.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol7/iss1/23>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of International and Global Studies* by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact phuffman@lindenwood.edu.

**Kingston, J. *Critical Issues in Contemporary Japan.*
New York and London: Routledge, 2014.**

The cataclysmic catastrophe that shook Japan on March 11, 2011 became a violent awakening for Japanese society. Not only were the Japanese faced with reconstruction after the country's strongest earthquake and highest tsunami, along with the meltdowns of three nuclear facilities, but the country's otherwise docile citizenry also came face to face with a bureaucracy of incompetency. For the last four years, social movements have erupted nationally, rallying for the decommissioning of all nuclear reactors in Japan, for the repeal of the Act on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets,¹ and most recently, against the constitutional reinterpretation and related bills that would allow for Japanese troops to engage in combat—something that constitutional scholars argue is inherently unconstitutional under the current Peace Constitution. Despite such upheaval, the nation has also recently enjoyed some success. Tokyo has been selected to host the 2020 Olympics. Shinzo Abe, a nationalistic politician from the conservative Liberal Democratic Party, regained power in 2012 as prime minister for the second time, and has implemented some economic reform.

It is against this backdrop that Jeff Kingston, Professor of History and Director of Asian Studies at Temple University's Japan Campus, attempts to shed light on various facets of Japanese society, including domestic and international affairs, energy policy, civil society, and the potential for Japan to reform both politically and economically. In tackling the intricacies of this enigmatic country, Kingston aims to “challenge assumptions and facile impressions while imparting the perceptions of experts” (p. 3). Japan is in a flux; the country's leadership finds itself “contesting and promoting competing agendas that are shaping emerging realities and future outcomes,” and the expert contributors in this book each provide their analyses of the fluctuating nature of Japanese society (p.5). While Kingston is a historian, the book is a collaborative effort by anthropologists, social scientists, legal professionals, and those in business to peel away the jargon that often surrounds anthropological studies, allowing its readers to truly understand Japan from the interdisciplinary and critical perspective of its authors.

The book is formed under five distinct but related categories: “Political Environment” provides an overview of domestic politics, the judicial system, public policy, media, and society; “Nuclear and Renewable Energy” illustrates the historical formation of postwar energy policy and how corporate-bureaucratic interconnectedness has stifled meaningful action in the immediate aftermath of the nuclear meltdowns in Fukushima; “International Dynamics” examines the nature of territorial disputes Japan has with South Korea, China, and Russia, as well as the highly contested base-relocation issues in Okinawa; “Social Dilemmas” addresses the demographic dilemmas Japan faces, namely its relations with minorities, women, tensions between the individual and the group, and rapid depopulation facing rural areas; lastly, “Reforming Japan?” is a collection of essays pleading with Japan to continue its legal reforms and educational reforms, and warning Japan of the potential for “missing out” if it chooses to remain the parochial nation it has thus far been in the international system.

¹ The Act on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets, also known as the State Secrecy Law is a law enacted in 2013, intended to protect specially designated secrets. However, scholars, lawyers, and journalists have argued that the law is deliberately ambiguously worded, so that the government does not need to reveal what a “specially designated secret” constitutes—i.e., the government can arrest journalists for accessing specially designated secrets, without telling them what information is regarded as being a specially designated secret, and the courts can convict defendants without addressing this fact as well; C.f. Lawrence Repeta, "Japan's 2013 State Secrecy Act -- The Abe Administration's Threat to News Reporting," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 12, Issue 10, No. 1, March 10, 2014.

Being a collaborative study, this work is inevitably marked by the seemingly contradictory analyses of its various authors. For example, Paul Scalise argues, “No actor in Japan controls the policy agenda completely, consistently, and unquestionably” (p.102). In the chapter immediately following, however, Jeff Kingston illustrates the nature of the “nuclear village,” which controls Japan’s nuclear policy, stating that it “is able to block ‘radical Japanese nuclear policy change in any direction After all . . . , veto-players tend to stand up for their perceived interests” (p.117). Other than such contradictions, the book lacks any notable weaknesses, excluding those inherent to any edited volume that covers multiple and complex issues in a limited amount of space, such as the omission of the then ensuing debate on altering the Constitution, or the rightward shift of Japanese politics that other scholars allege.

An underlying theme in the book is the dichotomy between what Daniel Aldrich refers to as “low political efficacy”—typically describing a society in which citizens believe their own political participation to be a waste of time and energy—and the culturalist argument that Japanese favor consensus building rather than self-assertiveness (p.80). However, Akihiro Ogawa alludes to yet another factor typical of Japanese culture, namely that of the nature of state cooptation of social movements in Japan. That is, the Japanese government has strategically institutionalized certain civil society organizations that have promoted the “state ideology,” while quelling movements that were actively critical of the policies of the government (p.60). The combination of cultural deference towards consensus, whether one calls it a culturalist argument or “low political efficacy,” and the strategic cooptation of critical voices by the government has fostered an intrinsically docile citizenry apathetic to political participation. The combination of these concepts allows us to understand the record-low voter-turnout in the 2014 General Election, the obstacles journalism faces in becoming more independent (p.73), the apathy of mainlanders towards the plight of the Okinawans (p.183), and the unchallenged prejudice that Japanese minorities face (p.210).

At the time of this review, the ominous “war bills” have yet to be bulldozed into enactment by the ruling nationalist coalition government. Robert Dujarric and Ayumi Takenaka remind us that “the elite must lose faith in the legitimacy of existing institutions for a revolution to succeed. Today’s Japanese Establishment still believes in the system” (p.284). With nuclear energy production being rebooted in Japan, alongside the ruling coalition moving to enact seemingly unconstitutional laws, it is without question that Japan will inevitably continue in its path, without any revolutionary change. The current mass demonstrations occurring in Tokyo against the “war bills” are, as Ogawa would elucidate, mere jury-rigged pressure valves, “allowing a venting of citizen anger while [the government proceeds] with . . . agendas undeterred” (p.61).

Perhaps, as David Leheny notes in the final chapter, the course Japan is taking is something the Japanese “wouldn’t expect Westerners to understand” (p.291). *Critical Issues in Contemporary Japan* makes an honest effort to tackle several issues in Japanese society that may be foreign to many non-Japanese. The strength of the text is that it articulates, in an easy-to-understand manner, the nature of contemporary Japanese society and the problems it faces today. Furthermore, the text is highly relevant to the changes occurring at this very moment, and will be so for the foreseeable future. It is undeniably one of the most thorough volumes ever written on the subject, with chapters authored by world-renown scholars such as David Aldrich, David McNeill, Kyle Cleveland, and Jeff Kingston himself. It is highly recommended to all students, scholars, and specialists alike who wish to better understand contemporary Japan, and perhaps utilize the information within to change the course of the nation.

Douglas M. Miller
Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies
University of Washington
dqs@uw.edu