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## Kingston, J. (Ed.). *Critical Issues in Contemporary Japan*. New York: Routledge, 2014.

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**Kingston, J. (Ed.). *Critical Issues in Contemporary Japan*. New York: Routledge, 2014.**

What do we truly know about contemporary Japan? And what does the world's third largest economy stand to teach us? The triple disaster of March 11, 2011 (earthquake, tsunami, and subsequent Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster) thrust Japan into an international public spotlight, causing many to reexamine the Japan they thought they knew. Although some scholars of Japan would argue that the concept of "whither Japan" has little merit in the twenty-first century, much of the world has trouble understanding that a "Japan in flux" represents not the demise of the nation but rather the potential for its growth—due directly to the challenges it faces. *Critical Issues* offers a multidisciplinary approach to the international, regional, and societal issues facing contemporary Japan. Organized thematically, this book consists of 22 chapters focused on current issues and deep-seated problems that impact Japan's relations with its regional neighbors, international partners, and its own citizens. Although much of the literature found in the book is focused on political relations and examines Japan in relation to the U.S., the authors, using a variety of approaches, push their audience to reconsider the perception of Japan within English-language literature.

Editor Jeff Kingston has set out to compile a comprehensive tome that presents an alternate view to the "whither Japan" argument—one which calls the power and direction of Japan into question—and which appears to dominate much of the English-language literature on Japan. Kingston, et al. argue that this concept continues to plague public perceptions of a country and government "unwilling to reform" and perpetuates notions of a bleak future for the economic superpower. The aim of the text is to demonstrate a growing need to look more closely at the decades of change that Japan has undergone since World War II in order to better understand the complexity and nuances of this "troubled" modern nation.

Each section of the text reviews the role the government in Japan has played in aspects of society and politics and highlights its role as the overall reason for lack of apparent change. The primary focus of essays found in Parts I and II are on Japan after the 3/11 disaster, while essays in Parts III, IV, and V aim to examine long-standing issues (mainly post-WWII) in both the domestic and international arena. Each chapter in the book works in accord to demonstrate the need to study and (re)examine Japan in regional and international politics. Part I, consisting of five chapters, begins with Arthur Stockwin's examination of the Japanese political system and ends with David McNeill's critical analysis of the role politics plays in Japan's media. The strongest chapter of this section is Akihiro Ogawa's examination of the public sphere in the wake of 3/11. Ogawa argues that while it is doubtful that significant policy shifts will be determined by social movements, recent anti-nuclear demonstrations reveal that civil society in Japan is not as "monolithic" as many would believe. What is revealing here is that in contemporary Japan, citizen involvement in grass roots movements and democratic life is increasing, which demonstrates some hope for a shift towards change.

The essays in Part II build upon a post-3/11 Japan through examinations of nuclear and renewable energy. The four chapters in this part examine the role of private companies, government agencies, and public support for nuclear energy despite the Fukushima nuclear disaster. Kingston gives context for Japan's reluctance to move away from nuclear power (Chapter 8), explaining that while public opinion favors phasing out nuclear power, conservative policies and advocates retain the power to decide the outcome of this matter. Overall, this section builds off of essays in Part I, most notably Ogawa's chapter, in noting that alongside rising dissent from the public, it is important to understand the reasons for Japan's apparent consistency despite changes in public approval, namely the country's decades-long history of conservative politics. Part III examines "International Dynamics" with essays that focus on Japan's role in the Asia region during (and after) the Pacific War. This section begins with Sven Saaler's analysis of the ongoing importance of history education in Japan's regional relationships, most notably with China and South Korea, and ends with Alexis Dudden's exploration of the decades of protest in Okinawa over the presence of American military

bases. This section is a nice introduction to complex and ongoing debates stemming from Japan's colonial past, providing a basic understanding of political motives and issues that threaten the stability of the East Asia region—though somehow it seems to be the weakest section in relation to the rest of the book.

Part IV presents some of the more complex essays of the book overall. This section focuses on a theme of social dilemmas, largely centered on women's rights, mental health, and demographic stagnation. The three chapters in Part V question Japan's ability to reform. The authors here seek to ask whether or not Japan has made true changes politically, economically, and socially in the modern era. The authors in Chapters 20 and 21 argue that while Japan participates globally, it has done little to embrace reform and prepare its citizens to be global actors outside Japan. However, David Leheny's essay (Chapter 22) questions the need to re-examine what "ails" Japan, arguing that the notion of "saving" Japan from itself is unfounded. As he explains, Japan struggles with wartime legacies (as seen in the essays of Part III) and a need to retain some form of tradition alongside its modern culture (as seen in the essays of Part IV), but it is not the only nation in the post-war era that has been struggling to do so. Leheny challenges us to consider why Japan is singled out and used as a case study for being abnormal or unique in regards to international norms.

Kingston, et al. state that this book is intended for a broad audience and argue that readers who have no prior knowledge of Japan will find the essays accessible. While this book would be most valuable if used in an upper-level international relations undergraduate course focused on Asia, it could also be used successfully in an introductory graduate area studies course at the university level. However, as with any text, there are some chapters that felt very dense and too full of field-specific jargon, making it more difficult for readers without some background in Japanese history or culture to navigate. Yet, without such detail, the reader would be left without an understanding of how intertwined many "critical issues" truly are. Together, all essays provide an introduction to understanding the reasons for the both the failures that Japan has suffered and the strides it has made as an ever-evolving modern nation.

The overall strength of this book is not only the very breadth of the topics and disciplines of the essays' authors (which include history, political science, public policy, law, anthropology, education, health, economics, and business) but the authors themselves, who both offer explanation (and in some cases challenge) the notion that Japan is a modern nation somehow incapable of change. One could argue that Leheny's message provides the most significant take away from the book; he asserts that using *nihonjinron* (demonstrating Japan's differences through culture) as the argument for a "whither Japan" simply does not hold up. For decades, scholars have been debating the stronghold conservative politics has over Japan and offering various theories and perceptions of where Japan is heading as a modern, global nation. Despite all the political consistency and troubles that a declining population, ongoing economic woes, and disputes over historical memory bring Japan and its global partners, it is crucial to recognize that a "modern" nation comes in many forms. This is an essential component to understanding the true Japan and its relations with the world.

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