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A full-scale examination of the inner workings of Japan's political and industrial system.

The Enigma of Japanese Power: People and Politics in a Stateless Nation Details

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Keith says

Finished the Enigma of Japanese Power in 2006- it's a book that came out in 1989 + 'the bubble that does not burst'. It's a very scholarly book by Karel van Wolferen. I must have tried reading it over the past decade because I have penciled notes. The gist of the book- Japanese power is not the emperor's power or the prime minister's power but a collective power of the established system-(the government is 80% who graduate from Todai etc- no outsiders please) + their agenda is to keep themselves in power. They could care less about their citizens or the middle class- they don't even know they have a choice or say- so obviously Japan is not a democracy- more like China's communism, but with America's support for their purported democracy.

He says Japanese are intellectually poor- they can't even debate an issue. The media is controlled by Dentsu + is mental equivalent of 8 y/o. Only 1.7% can pass bar exam for lawyer, so Matsuo (my mother's family lawyer) is like a king-and must be bowed to. Nobody in Japan has a right to sue anyway. It seems like I was someone who was born + bred in Japan for 18 yrs and knew nothing about Japan- not even how the people think + act.

Ricardo says

An impressive book on the way politics and power work in Japan. For all those with an activity related to Japan this is fundamental reading. It will also help you reflect on the political system of your own country, and you will find yourself asking - is it different in my country? You will also wonder if such a comprehensive analysis on how things really work has been done for many other countries.

After reading this book, many things will fall in place, and you will appreciate much better what is really going on. You will also be able to distinguish those who have a grasp from those who don't. It changes your perspective. I can only recommend it as urgent reading.

Finally, there is the timing of the book. It was written at the end of the 80's when the Japanese expansion was about to halt. In a way the book was premonitory in identifying the inability of setting any policy and implementing it - this was clear and accurate. But it only slightly touches two massive shortcomings in the system, which have become clear in the past 20 years and we can today appreciate with hindsight. The first is the fundamental handicap in terms of innovation. The system was designed for catching up but not for leading, and is unable to generate the dialectic movements that make technologies, industries and ideas advance. Both because it is inefficient as it avoids competition, and because it fosters conformity instead of disruption. The last two decades show that the country has been progressively unable to compete internationally. The second is that social progress can still take place, and in the case of Japan the most extreme result of the work and family arrangements was the drop in the birth rate to a level where the country faces serious problems of sustainability - also because the system is unable to steer into solving them. It is, therefore, a blind juggernaut. The assessment of Van Wolferen is impressive in diagnosing and in predicting the dire consequences of the diagnosis. We'll all be here to watch.

Kshitiz Goliya says

The book gives an inside view of Japanese society, culture and economy. It touches almost every aspect of Japanese society, but mostly dwells on politics and economy. It gives a totally alternative view of Japan from what the outsiders generally think. Instead of a hardworking and free country, it shows how the people of Japan are instructed and taught to behave in a certain way from the beginning. The great role that personal political influence or 'jinmyaku' play in the Japanese politics is very well documented. It destroys many stereotypes but also kind of create new ones. The writer, an American, in the later chapters focuses a lot on the unfair trade practices being employed by Japanese that in turn harm U.S. and Europe. Well, every country wants to have an upper hand in trade and if Japanese have achieved this, it is indeed an achievement and not a injustice. The U.S. does the same when it comes to military hegemony. But the book encompasses a lot and forces one to rethink about Japan. The radical view is difficult to accept for a person reading about Japan for the first time. Although the book has rich references, I advise readers to go for another book on the same topic before they reach a judgement and settle an image of Japan in their mind. Nonetheless, the book is well researched and exhaustive, when it comes to covering one of the most intriguing civilization of the modern era.

Dinda says

The Japanese have been taking over entire industries worldwide and storming the high ground of international finance, yet Japan does not behave in the way that the rest of the world expects a world power to behave. In *The Enigma Of Japanese Power*, the first book to effectively analyze the structure of the Japanese social and political reality, the author shows how the docile conformity exemplified by company loyalty, near absence of litigation, and lack of individualism of Japanese society and culture originates in political purpose, with international ramifications. Here is a revealing portrait of society that will to a large extent affect our own future.

Dan says

A dense work on how power is exercised in Japan. The author draws from a wealth of sources political, economic, social and historical to make the case that while Japan has the appearance of democracy, its power structure is actually a chaotic patchwork of bureaucratic oligarchies insulated from public oversight. Although people of Chomsky's persuasion may believe this is also true of the United States, Wolferen makes it clear that the US and Europe are nowhere close to possessing the national groupthink Japan exhibits. For example,

The general character and emphases of Japanese education, together with what amounts to indoctrination via the media and the corporations, hamper the development of liberated citizens. The System stultifies where it should stimulate; it actively prevents the self-realization of the individual.

Now Wolferen does not deny that the Japanese have accomplished great things, such as building a safe and prosperous economic powerhouse almost from scratch since the end of the war. But as far as Japanese governance is concerned, Wolferen has painted a bleak picture indeed, and he pulls no punches in his critique.

There are many thorny sections that go into great detail about how the bureaucracies, political parties, courts, businesses and other organizations operate where the reader may get understandably lost and/or bored (as I did). But the book is worth reading just for the more general insights on the Japanese power structure and its effect on its people. You can skip much of the details and still gain much from it.

Jacob van Berkel says

Detailed, but the details are not always telling and the narrative tends to get lost in them. Making it a sometimes interesting, but also highly messy, repetitive, and tiring read.

The main point is that Japan is basically rudderless, or at least captain-less: no one is ultimately capable of or can be held responsible for decision-making. Instead, it is governed by various organizations (the LDP, various ministries, conglomerates, etc.) that think and act independently, like the arms of an octopus, but less in tandem with each other. An example might be the China War of the 1930s; this was famously not the result of a decision made by the central government, but by one the octopus's arms independently (the Kwantung Army) with the rest of the octopus getting dragged along by this arm. Japan, the author argues, fundamentally still operates this way. It doesn't use its head (in fact it doesn't even *have* a head, there is, according to the author, no 'state' and no 'Japan') but instead takes its cues from the arms. And with none of the arms powerful enough to take charge of the course of the entire octopus, it is ultimately doomed to stay the course it is on.

Another important point of the book is how the way power is organized in Japan stifles the individual. It explicitly challenges the usual 'cultural explanation' of why Japanese people tend conform to their social environment, this has become a 'cultural *excuse*', blinding both Japanese and foreign observers to the very real institutional pressures *to* conform.

So, some good and interesting points there, making the book perhaps worth your time. However, despite these good points, I did not have a good time reading this book. If it stayed more focused on these points, perhaps I would have, but instead it constantly gets lost in a swamp of details that are often messy and repetitive, and sometimes boring and beside the point.

They are also often quite contentious. And while the author has a habit of providing references for opinions and phrasings, he does not always do so for assertions of fact, and when he does it's sometimes with notes like '*from a personal correspondence with a mutual friend*'. Makes the work seem occasionally shoddy.

Anyway, in summary and conclusion: might be worth your while, but don't skip on the skimming, and trust, but verify.

Sandy says

this blistering book was initially banned in Japan shortly after it was published. It is full of hard truths about that complex and contradictory land. Ultimately, the ban was removed as that was where I bought and read it... and finally found some answers to plaguing questions.... is it me? is it the Japanese? Beautiful country, exquisite culture but how do you reconcile that with so much brutal and bristling nastiness.... read this book if you are curious of what I speak and saw and to some extent experienced in my 2 years in Tokyo.

Adelle says

This book mainly talked about how power is organized in Japan, and how that manifests itself in different aspects of Japanese culture. I recommend this for anyone living in Japan or interested in the culture. It's very academic/dry, and what kept it interesting for me is that living in Japan, I was able to witness firsthand some of the claims of the book.

Sean says

This is a very intriguing survey of Japanese culture written by a Westerner who has spent much of his life in Japan. It focuses on the different means by which social order is maintained in Japanese society. Van Wolferen concludes that Japan is a "stateless nation" whose institutions mask the racial ties through which real power flows. Even if you are not particularly interested in Japan, or if you believe that Japanese culture has undergone fundamental changes since the book was written in the 1980s, it is a interesting survey of how power works in a non-Western country.

And then you can read a similar book which recommended "The Enigma of Japanese Power" to me, Dave Barry's "Dave Barry Does Japan", which has the advantage of being much funnier and which highlights some other aspects of Japanese society (corn on pizza!).

Vasil Kolev says

This book definitely answered a lot of questions on the Japanese culture and people that I had in my head.

Mostly what it describes is a combination between an autocratic bureaucracy and a cult that encompasses the whole country. It explains all the cliches you can see in anime/manga and the general behavior of the Japanese people. There's some bias in the author, but that doesn't seem to affect the conclusions of the book.

All in all, the best book about Japan that I've seen. I wonder if there's an update for the last 20 years (this was finished in 1988).

David Bonesteel says

Journalist Karel van Wolferen makes a compelling case for the argument that there is virtually no one in control of the Japanese state: it's ruling elite consists of administrators who jockey for position as they seek advantage for their respective ministries, thereby making it difficult for Japan to speak with a unified voice on the international front or make commitments to foreign governments on which it can follow through. Detractors unfairly stain van Wolferen's name with the epithet "Japan-basher," but it was clear to me that he felt a great deal of empathy for the average Japanese, who he says also suffers under the system he describes.

The most refreshing aspect of this book is that it avoids that tired cliché of Japan writing: the portrait of the Japanese as purely the unique product of a unique culture, as if they were a charming and polite race not entirely of this world. Get to know them personally and you find that we have far more in common than not. Power corrupts in Japan, just as it does everywhere else. People have a tendency to value the status quo and

basically trying to make it look bad. I think he just didn't get it. Period. And by his inability to understand the Law of Karma, Law of Impermanence, and other concepts of Dhamma such as life, death, and nature as it is, the author got confused about Japan and that made him angry. That's what set the tone of the book. Too bad with so much research and his style of writing, he got many people believe that what he said is true. The author's first problem is he doesn't understand the enigma that is Japan and he is angry about it and he was trying in a western way which is doing so much research, looking around to try to find answer. But he looked in the *wrong* place. To understand something, you have to use the mind. The Japanese people has over a thousand years of mind-training that has penetrated into their culture and psyche that the modern Japanese themselves even don't realize it anymore that it is Buddhism's idea of mindfulness and it led them to the understanding and accepting the world view of impermanence. This, the author doesn't understand. And he continuously talked in circles, blaming "systems", etc. In Chapter 1 alone, you feel that you are reading an accusation of someone who lost a fight and try to say bad things of someone who won because they were simply better at that particular encounter. And, for that matter, I feel sorry for the author, really. The book was written long ago, in 1989, and I hope that by this time the author has enlightened a bit. Because, living with his worldview, he would be forever doomed in his own self-made suffering, caused by ignorance.

David B says

Journalist Karel van Wolferen makes a compelling case for the argument that there is virtually no one in control of the Japanese state: it's ruling elite consists of administrators who jockey for position as they seek advantage for their respective ministries, thereby making it difficult for Japan to speak with a unified voice on the international front or make commitments to foreign governments on which it can follow through. Detractors unfairly stain van Wolferen's name with the epithet "Japan-basher," but it was clear to me that he felt a great deal of empathy for the average Japanese, who he says also suffers under the system he describes.

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Van Wolferen's book deserves serious consideration, not to be dismissed as the diatribe of a racist.

Hadrian says

Intense polemic on the nature of Japanese society - van Wolferen says that there is no central power structure, but instead a broader decentralized network which he calls 'the System'. The Enigma of Japanese power came out in the late 1980s, a time when Japanese economic growth was forecast to be one of the most preeminent in the world - but all this disintegrated in the real estate asset bubble which exploded in 1991, and Japan is still recovering from, even today. Now China is the Yellow Peril, but its economic future is hardly built on a solid foundation.

But what is Wolfered saying about Japanese society which got him so much attention in the late 1980s? His

view is of a strong homogeneous elite which consolidates power among itself in the form of the LDP party apparatus and the civil service, willfully keeps the majority of the population as docile laborers, and emphasizes economic growth above all. It is not about power for power's sake, but power in defense of a polity - Japan's economic policy, like that of the other East Asian tigers, was of a 'developmental' protectionist state.

There's also some stuff here which stomps into the hunting grounds of cultural anthropology. Specifically, van Wolferen views Japan as an essentially feudal state, more or less unchanged from the medieval society of 500 years ago (or earlier) and thus inherently different (opposed to?) any Western observer. Wolferen's book is a cultural analysis clothed in institutional terms.

Now what does this book look like, some twenty years on? Japan's economic miracle came to a crashing halt twenty years ago, and even the Liberal Democratic Party lost power for a few years after each financial crisis. (They did eventually come back - first after a few months absence in 1994, and now Abe won since 2012.

A main criticism I have heard from Japanese reviews is that this book only focuses on the negatives of Japanese society. This is true. But then again, I don't see people making such complaints about The Wire. And many of the incidents which Wolferen describes are true - the cartel of the Japanese Medical Association, pork barrel projects, and even the confusion over culpability in the most recent Fukushima disaster - Tokyo Electric Power Company lies somewhere outside the government-owned private dichotomy, and there has been a lack of responsibility in its inspections as far back as 2002.

Wolferen's book is not always rigorous in an academic sense, but it does retain focus on one thing - the organization and dispersal of power. His view is that Japan is a nation of 'social control', which was first tried in Western Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. Japan is not the only nation to try such things, of course, but van Wolferen says it was the only one to survive the Second World War (with the tacit acceptance of the US, who needed anti-communist allies). But it was social control without a central authority, and this lack of a coordinated response this had led to crack's in Japan's myth of invincibility (Aum Shinrikyo, the bubble economy, Fukushima). There is also the matter of the DJP, which briefly took power in 2009, but was stymied by institutional deadlock.

There is little else I can say with any certainty. Japan's future is not certain. Twenty five years ago, Japan was supposed to be the number one economy in the world. Now it is third, behind China (fourth if you count the EU). What can be said is that not even a 'system' so entrenched can last forever.
