



With five reviews covering a wide range of topics and styles, from an academic monograph to memoirs, fiction, and an art book, the April issue of *The Japan Society Review* offers an excellent example of the rich variety of Japan-related publications regularly arriving in the UK.

The issue opens with a review of *Towards Japan: A Personal Journey*, the autobiography of J. Arthur Stockwin. Distinguished author and former Professor of Modern Japanese Studies at Oxford, Stockwin explores his personal journey from being the son of medical/dental parents in Birmingham to becoming a specialist in the politics and modern history of Japan. As reviewer William Horsley writes, “through his 60 years as a Japan scholar Arthur Stockwin has made a lasting mark as an interpreter of the country and a major force in bringing Japanese studies out of a “ghetto” and into the mainstream of international studies”. His memoirs present an expert view of the development of both Japanese studies and Japan’s post-war history as well as an outline of the future challenges in both fields.

Remaining in the academic sphere, our second review explores the lives and influence of leading right-wing intellectuals in the early part of the Showa Era (1926–1989). Focusing on two radical individuals Minoda Muneki (1894–1946) and Mitsui Koshi (1883–1953), *Arbiters of*

*Patriotism* by John D. Person offers a more complex and multifaceted history of state power, nationalism, and political discourses during the Japanese Empire.

Two reviews of Japanese fiction written by women are also included in this issue. The short story collection *Things Remembered And Things Forgotten* is the new English translation of the work of Nakajima Kyoko, the prize-winning author of *The Little House*. As in her previous work, this volume also explores the postwar experiences and memories of individuals through well-crafted, emotional, and effective storytelling. *There’s No Such Thing As An Easy Job* is the first novel by Tsumura Kikuko to be translated into English. Following a young woman in her journey through five different jobs, Tsumura presents a humorous and surreal depiction of the working experience and everyday routines in contemporary Japan.

The April issue closes with a review of a monograph on Japanese crafts. *Handmade in Japan*, edited by Tokyo-based photographer Irwin Wong and published by art and design publisher Gestalten, looks inside the workshops of artisans and craftspeople in Japan, revealing their artistry and rich traditions and documenting their handmade processes.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

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## Editor

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

## Reviewers

Francesco Cioffo, Laurence Green, William Horsley, David Tonge, and Beau Waycott.

Image: © *Handmade in Japan*

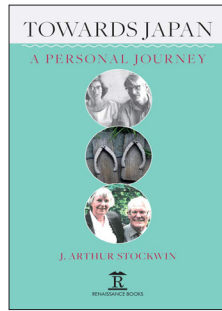
## Towards Japan: A Personal Journey

by J. Arthur Stockwin

Renaissance Books (2020)

ISBN-13: 978-1912961108

Review by William Horsley



Through his 60 years as a Japan scholar Arthur Stockwin has made a lasting mark as an interpreter of the country and a major force in bringing Japanese studies out of a “ghetto” and into the mainstream of international studies. He achieved much of that during his tenure as the first Nissan Professor of Modern Japanese Studies at Oxford University between 1982 and 2003. His lifetime’s published works have covered a broad sweep of Japanese politics, economy, government and foreign policy.

The fruits of his team-building and collaborative scholarship at Oxford include more than 100 book titles published in the Routledge Japanese Studies book series, the extension of teaching courses on Japan to other university faculties such as politics, economics and history, and a weekly Nissan Institute seminar to disseminate new research on Japan to a wider community of Japan-watchers. Here he also shows himself a “critical friend” of Japan over flaws in its democracy which he sees as spelling possible trouble ahead.

Born in 1935, Arthur was evacuated from his parents’ home in Birmingham in 1941 to escape German bombs. His interest in Japan was kindled late. After learning Russian through an army course during national service and then gaining a PPE degree at Oxford, at 24 he sailed with his wife Audrey to Australia intending to do post-graduate research on Russia. Instead he “discovered” Japan and switched to a topic in Japanese politics and foreign policy, meaning that he had first to learn the language. From 1964 to 1981 he taught at the Department of Political Science of the Australian National University in Melbourne. From the start his approach was imbued with empathy as well as admiration for the country he had chosen to be the focus of his attention.

In the early post-war years the British public’s image of Japan was negative or openly hostile, shaped by recent memories and images of Emperor worship, kamikaze raids and cruelty to prisoners of war. He recalls watching a US Army training film about Japan’s wartime military power and tenacity. He was horrified that it portrayed the Japanese as ‘a different and verminous species from ourselves’. His diary entry

as a 19-year-old described the film as ‘something like an excitement to a five minutes hate’ [sic]. But the episode prompted the youthful Arthur to reflect on what it would take to transform a nation known to a generation for ultranationalist ideology, militarism and political repression into a modern democratic state.

His autobiography sets out to “splice together” the author’s own life with the modern reality of Japan. What follows is a discursive account of Stockwin’s journey of research and discovery. It takes him from his native Britain via what he calls the ‘uncluttered’ intellectual environment of Australia to his multiple explorations of Japan, and eventually back to his alma mater in Oxford, where he retired in 2003 and continues to research and write.

The book is also a personal testament of faith in the country. That creed is captured in lines that he wrote back in the early 1980s, during the heady atmosphere’ generated by the economic miracle and the surge of global interest in the internal dynamics of the society that produced it.

‘From the ashes of defeat in 1945 Japan has risen to become one of most dynamic and successful economic powers in the world today... Japan is neither unique (as sometimes asserted) nor merely a copy of the outside world, but rather a fascinating source of human experience which deserves to be tapped and disseminated far more widely’.

The book’s 254 pages lovingly chronicle the author’s and his family’s fortunes and impressions along the way, his navigation of the currents and channels of his academic career, and his own painstaking efforts to analyse Japan’s political system in its own terms and without prejudice. His entry point was to research the functioning of political parties as vehicles for representing public opinion in Japan, from the Meiji period to modern times.

While eschewing value judgements or stereotypes, Stockwin’s findings illuminate several very distinctive and recurring patterns Japan’s political party system. Among them are the phenomenon that parties and internal party factions often consolidate around individual powerful leaders, only to collapse and re-appear in new forms. In pre-war times, he writes, political groupings ‘divided much like cells in a human body’. The nation’s early 20th century attempt at democracy was thwarted by ‘in-built authoritarian institutions and practices’. The centre could not hold and Japan descended into ‘government by assassination’. Even the Imperial Army was beset by

rival factions which vied to spearhead Japan's path towards war.

Immediately after Japan's surrender, Marxist agitation and ideas were contained under the US-led Occupation. But later the country's socialist and communist Parties did fierce ideological battle with each other rather than joining forces. The Japan Socialist Party was prone to splits over political doctrines and neutralism in foreign policy. The master stroke of Japan's right-of-centre political forces, some of which had organic links with those who led Japan to war and overseas conquest, was to bring the rival conservative force together in 1955 under the banner of the Liberal Democratic Party, which portrayed itself as a natural party of government.

Stockwin credits internal competition among the LDP's internal factions as an important factor in the party's ability to regenerate itself and maintain its almost continuous hold on power, while opposition parties were unable to present a consistent or united challenge. The socialists, he writes, behaved as if they were 'frightened' of taking power. In 2009 a new kid on the opposition bloc, the Democratic Party of Japan, was swept into office promising root and branch political reform. In Stockwin's account, several changes of party leadership and the DPJ's mishandling of the 2011 Fukushima disaster hastened its fall in 2012. But that ignominious failure is described as a tragedy for hopes that Japan would establish a credible two-party system and a truly pluralist democracy.

Professor Stockwin is sharply critical of the administration of prime minister Shinzo Abe (2012-2020), which he says consciously sought to 'shift the balance in favour of authoritarian values of top-down

decision-making', including through curbs on free expression, the mass media and civil society. Among the negative consequences, he writes, have been a serious weakening of the mechanisms that should hold executive power to account, as well as more 'pork-barrel politics' and corruption scandals.

On the positive side, Mr Abe is credited with some skill in his handling of the economy as well as Japan's important relationships with China and the United States. But the author deeply deplores his choices to ally himself with far-right organisations like Nippon Kaigi (Japan Association), and to declare his government's intention to revise Article 9 of Japan's constitution, the "peace clause". Stockwin notes that despite pressure from the United States for Japan to become a fully-fledged and capable ally in military matters, until now most Japanese have steadily opposed such a change. He even warns that to get rid of the clause, or even modify it, would risk 'opening the floodgates' to a kind of nationalism reminiscent of the pre-war and wartime periods.

The book closes with a broad balance-sheet of the state of Japan's body politic. It acknowledges that contemporary Japan is a stable, civilised and prosperous society which has enjoyed seven decades of peace, and its political system has played its part in delivering those benefits. But the proven weakness of political checks and balances and a retreat from democratic accountability are seen as seriously troubling. 'The system is surely awaiting radical reconstruction', Stockwin concludes. The implied message is that such a major task calls for a generation of leaders who possess qualities of far-sightedness and integrity which in recent years have been in short supply. §

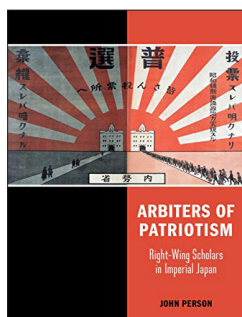
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## Arbiters of Patriotism: Right-Wing Scholars in Imperial Japan

by John D. Person

University of Hawai'i Press (2020)  
ISBN-13: 978-082488178

Review by Francesco Cioffo



John D. Person's *Arbiters of Patriotism* begins with a very important question: 'how do we think about fanatics in history?' (p. 1). This is indeed a very interesting and fundamental question which opens up a much wider debate about the role of the intellectual in the society and their relation to the actual centre of

power, the state. Arguably, in fact, what this question really asks is, who gets to decide who is a fanatic and who is a patriot? In order to address these issues Person effectively writes two, tightly interlocked, biographical accounts of Minoda Muneki (1894–1946) and Mitsui Koshi (1883–1953). Minoda and Mitsui were two of the many "irrational fanatics" that populated Japanese public opinion in the early part of the Showa Era (1926–1989). Mitsui was a well-known contributor to and editor of many Japanese conservative publications. He was the mentor of Minoda and together they founded the *Genri Nippon Society* and its eponymous magazine, which became the centres of anti-patriotic bullying and Japanist propaganda.



This book is not only Person's first monograph, but it is also the first book in English to extensively write about the lives of Minoda and Mitsui.

The first section of the book focuses on Mitsui's life and his emergence as a leading right-wing intellectual. In Chapter 1, Person explores the intellectual evolution on Mitsui's theory of poetry (the "Shikishima Way") from one focused upon the 'primacy of the expressive individual' to a jingoistic theory of 'ethnonational sentimentalism' which idealised the Emperor Meiji's poems as sort of holy scriptures (p. 40). Furthermore, this chapter is also an exploration of the discourses of "Japanisms" since the Meiji period, showing how these ideas mutated along with the changes within the Japanese state and its position in the international system (p. 31).

Chapter 2 looks at the Taisho years as a crucial moment for the formation of both Mitsui and Minoda (p. 42). Key to this chapter is the idea of the "Taisho Restoration" which is explored to uncover the intersections between nationalistic ideologies and the rise of mass politics. Especially in the works of Mitsui, in fact, one can notice the incorporation of some democratic ideas (male universal suffrage and the right to demonstrate), but only as a mean to unify the country against the corruption of the government (p. 55).

At the same time, the author shows how a political taxonomy with quasi-distinct ideas of left and right developed. Most importantly, the government emerged as the conspicuous centre actively defining the position of others on the political spectrum.

The second section of the book focuses on the more famous figure of Minoda. Chapter 3 explores two main issues. First, the chapter traces the transitional character of both left and right discourses, showing how Marxist theories developed alongside anti-Marxist ones. Interestingly, Person points out that despite differences, intellectuals on both sides tried to wrestle with the formulation of a 'nondeterministic theory of historical change' centred upon the agency of the individual (p. 66). Second, it tries to problematise the image of Japanism as being one with the Japanese state. Person in fact demonstrates how the influence of Minoda's arguments over other nationalist discourses and upon public and academic circles came as a result of Minoda's alignment with the government's social engineering efforts (p. 77). This relationship however was never idyllic, since even Minoda soon became a target of the political surveillance and scrutiny that he was advocating for the Left.

Chapter 4 discusses the most famous example of Minoda's power, the Imperial Organ Theory Incident of 1935, which established him as the key Japanist voice of his time. However, Person does not approach the topic only from the usual perspective of the fall of liberalism in Japan. Rather, he shows how the simultaneous rise of far-right terrorism transformed the government's approach to Minoda and the Right Wing, which came under strict police surveillance using the same tactics developed against the Left in the 1920s. From this perspective, what is interesting is actually to see how the police viewed some associations behind the public smear campaigns as the more pressing security threat (p. 113) than professor Minobe Tatsukuchi's (1873-1948) theories.

The fifth and final chapter traces the increasing intellectual irrelevancy of Japanism, which lost ground against technocratic and Pan-Asianist discourses, and the ultimate demise of the *Genri Nippon*. The government shifted once again Minoda's positions to the unwelcomed part of the Right Wing, so much so that later critics of the wartime regime were soon isolated and arrested.

Arguably, this book might have been theoretically too cautious. Parson writes that 'the Japanism of the Genri Nippon Society was one manifestation of the ideologies of fascism in Japan' (p. 10). However, it might be argued that Japanism was only one of the many strands of right-wing political discourses circulating across pre-war Japan, which included such ideologies as Fascism, Nazism, Pan-Asianism and so on and so forth.[1] To articulate Japanism as a form of Fascism could be too reductive. Perhaps this study might have benefitted from a more decisive rupture with the idea of Fascism as a category defining the ideology of an entire era, and a more systematic theorisation of Japanism as a specific discourse. Of course, this would not deter from establishing similarities and differences between the two discourses.

Ultimately, Person's *Arbiters of Patriotism* is a welcome contribution to the historiography of the Japanese Right. Person's historical analysis of the idea of the "Right Wing" reveals a much more complex and multifaceted history that would have been lost by just assuming the transhistorical value of the term. Perhaps the most interesting thing about the book, however, is how it shows the power of the state as the actual centre of all political conversations. While one might be tempted to assume that the people like Minoda and Mitsui were the judges of who was patriotic and who was not, Person's convincingly demonstrates

that the government and its organs were the actual arbiters of patriotism.

## Notes

[1] C. W. A. Szpilman, "Japan and the Question of Fascism 1918-1941" in *Teikyô daigaku bungakubu kiyô, Nihon bunka gakka* 50 (2019), pp. 1—46 (pp. 110—65); Saaler, Sven, and J. Victor Koschmann, eds. *Pan-Asianism in*

*Modern Japanese History: Colonialism, Regionalism and Borders* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007); Ricky W. Law, *Transnational Nazism: Ideology and Culture in German-Japanese Relations, 1919–1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Peter, Duus, and Daniel I. Okimoto. "Comment: Fascism and the History of Pre-War Japan: The Failure of a Concept." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 39, no. 1 (1979), pp. 65-76. §

## Things Remembered And Things Forgotten

by Nakajima Kyoko  
translated by Ian MacDonald and  
Ginny Tapley Takemori

Sort Of Books (2021)  
ISBN-13: 978-1908745965

Review by Laurence Green



For Tokyo-born author Nakajima Kyoko, memory stands as an incredibly fruitful font from which to draw a multitude of short-form confections. Gathered here in an attractive new collection from Sort Of Books, *Things Remembered And Things Forgotten* presents us with ten takes on the themes of cultural amnesia, of past and present colliding, of a Japan still very much coming to terms with years long gone by. These resonances will no doubt be familiar to those that enjoyed Nakajima's previous work to be translated into English - the Naoki prizewinning *The Little House*. Now, by way of a series of highly capable translations from Ginny Tapley Takemori and Ian McCullough MacDonald, we are given another bite of the cake, another opportunity to contend with - if only for a short while - the minutely intricate workings of a Japan that is never quite what it initially seems to be.

Part of the compelling power of *The Little House* was its status as a quiet masterpiece in subverting expectations. There, what begins as a seemingly humble, almost banal depiction of domesticity and scenes of a historic Japan lost to time slowly reveals itself as a powerful statement on the postwar experience; pulling back the veil that conceals the often cavernous gulf between official histories and personal memory. Much like Kazuo Ishiguro - to make an obvious comparison - Nakajima has a listener's ear for both the easy rhythms of conversational dialogue and the way this can be interweaved so artfully into the central narrative drive of a tale. Her narrators come to feel like friends, gentle companions guiding you through the reading experience - which makes the

inevitable 'surprise' they hold in reserve all the more impactful when it finally comes.

In *Things Remembered And Things Forgotten*, the three works that open this collection are in many ways the clear standouts here; technical exercises, almost, in showcasing the kind of literary mechanisms outlined above. In the title story - the translation of which was previously published in a special issue of *Granta* focusing on Japanese literature - the discussion of the postwar experience is at its most overt. We hear of an advert placed in the newspapers:

'URGENTLY SEEKING QUALIFIED FEMALE STAFF

Excellent pay and benefits - food, clothing and lodging provided; salary payable in advance upon request. Will reimburse applicants' travel expenses from anywhere in Japan.'

We are then told of the true meaning behind this seemingly innocuous ad, and what it implies for Japanese women in a nation occupied by US forces:

'Are you prepared to serve as a sexual breakwater to protect and nurture the purity of our race for the next hundred years?... In other words, you know... Doing it - with American GIs.'

The idea of an emotionally charged postwar experience is conveyed further in *The Life Story Of A Sewing Machine*, in which the narrative is centred around the tortured existence of a humble labour-saving device. Churning out clothes in the war years, an air raid sees the titular sewing machine reduced to a mangled wreck, only to be salvaged and brought back to life by an impoverished woman in the aftermath of Japan's defeat. As the country pieces itself back together and rebuilds, this bruised and battered machine becomes a lifeline, a route out of poverty - which makes its ultimate abandonment into first a storage cupboard, and then an antique shop, all the more heartbreaking. If ever an inanimate object was imbued with feeling, it is here.

Personal histories and sensitivity of emotion also mingle to charming effect in *When My Wife Was A Shiitake*. Here, in a story that mingles self-deprecating humour with touching sentiment, a widower finds an unusual connection to his deceased wife in the form of her handwritten cooking notebooks. From his initial, excruciatingly poor efforts at emulating his wife's cooking, he gradually progresses, his improving attempts serving not only as a cherished bond between him and the memories of his wife, but also their daughter and grandchild, who delight in the culinary wonders he comes to create.

Across all three of these stories, the sheer emotional poignancy is arguably worth the price of admission alone. This is not to say the other works that follow are necessarily weaker, only that their depths are more subtle - demanding more of the reader to tease out their significance and meaning. In *Kirara's Paper Plane*, a simple, comic turn on the ghost story format morphs into a moving social commentary on poverty. In *A Special Day*, we are presented with a distinctly weird, but highly evocative, portrayal of place as we are taken through, in precise detail, a small art gallery tucked away in the backstreets of Tokyo.

Some of the other stories - chiefly *The Pet Civet* and *Childhood Friends* - take on a sudden, surprising eroticism. Characters give themselves over to bodily pleasure with a sense of sheer freedom that is perfectly captured in the quiet intensity of Nakajima's prose. While these moments of sensuality may seem at odds with the thematic seriousness of her material on war memory, they hinge on a fundamentally similar understanding of the human condition; the basic - often impulsive - functions and urges that propel us through life from birth to death.

It is this consistency that lends an almost clockwork-like sleekness to each and every short story in this collection. Indeed, Nakajima's skill as a storyteller is very much that of the artisan craftsman, honing a set of delicate, finely tuned works that dazzle precisely because they combine art and function so effectively. Their brevity, if anything, only adds to this. Forced to deliver their emotional payload within a compact format, time and again Nakajima lulls us into a sense of comforting security, only to pull a killer twist on us. What we think we know is always only half the story. **S**

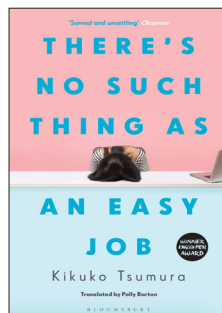
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## There's No Such Thing As An Easy Job

by Tsumura Kikuko  
translated by Polly Barton

Bloomsbury Publishing (2020)  
ISBN-13: 978-1526622242

Review by Beau Waycott



Within 10 months of her graduation, Tsumura Kikuko had quit her job after facing pawahara, or power harassment, from her boss. Since then, her writing has focused on the plight of young workers in Japan, winning her both the Akutagawa and Dazai Osamu Prizes. *There's No Such Thing As An Easy Job* won her the MEXT New Artist Award in 2016, and Polly Barton's new English translation offers Anglophone readers the chance to share the unnamed protagonist's time drifting between supposedly mundane jobs after corporate burnout. Despite wishing to mentally detach herself almost entirely, she comes to understand that human relationships make all jobs an investment, prompting a final re-examination of her time away from her career.

Divided into five chapters of between 70 to 100 pages, Tsumura has her protagonist find herself in a new job five times, each complete with its own

new location, host of characters, and impacts on the protagonist's daily routine. Through this serialized structure, Tsumura slowly allows her messaging to gain overtness in its politicisation. The significance of her first section manager being male, for example, is multiplied when, by her fifth section manager, a woman has still not fulfilled the role. Indeed, Tsumura's feminism is, whilst perhaps subtler than that of other contemporary Japanese writers, a constant throughout the novel, with the male role of the section manager being contrasted by female *senpai* who aid the protagonist—be she of a lower or higher position than them—in her journey towards the novel's conclusion.

The first stress-free job the protagonist finds herself in involves some kind of peculiar surveillance, monitoring a semi-successful writer thought to be harbouring contraband. Opening with markedly Kafkaesque themes, the mundanity of the job soon becomes clear, setting the quiet tone that will be nurtured over the next 400-or so pages. Not only are we introduced to the protagonist and her desires for mindless employment, but the odd procrastination techniques of the writer allow interesting possible parallels to Tsumura's writing habits. Indeed, it seems easier to draw parallels between Tsumura and this early

writer character than her protagonist, who seems to have left her job not due to some kind of discrimination but a more gender-neutral feeling of general burn out.

After this job ends, the protagonist begins writing audio advertisements for a local bus company. The plot becomes more curious, beginning to take a slightly magical realist turn as the protagonist slowly begins to see that new shops seem to be opening up randomly, whilst long-established establishments quietly shut their doors. What's more, these patterns seem to be somehow linked to the bus's advertisement schedule. With this unexpected additional burden, the protagonist soon begins working for a rice cracker company, writing titbits of trivia for the back of the packaging. This third section of the book offers the best insight into a more corporate, office-like Japanese workplace, with the complex relationships between staff members playing out through both office politics and workplace friendships. This section also contains some of Tsumura's most pointed criticisms of materialism and capitalist working patterns, which are underlying through the text, with underpaid female workers desperately trying to lift their children into higher education with the help of the crackers' factoids. However, another unexpected turn, this time the wild popularity of the trivia, leads the protagonist on to her next job.

This fourth job takes us out of the office and into the more domestic sphere. Now employed to tack up public information posters in the suburbs, the protagonist spends a lot of time speaking to the often-elderly local residents, exposing the issues that the elderly face in suburban communities. Moreover, as the suburbs become the focus of a curious new community group, those who wish to exploit the isolation of the elderly are also introduced.

The final - and *prima facie* the easiest - job, mapping areas of vegetation in a large national park, ends up exhausting, both through its demands and its surrealism. Soon after tones of magical realism re-enter, they are contextualised as simply extremely peculiar events, and the path that leads the protagonist to her final realisation becomes clear. Indeed, there are possible links to classic works of Japanese literature here, as there are throughout the novel, in which the protagonist's period of exile, here from professionalism, allows the introspection needed for a great realisation.

Although perhaps unusual for readers outside the UK, Barton's witty and warm use of British English imbues the plot with verisimilitude whilst deftly incorporating more foreign vocabulary, especially in Tsumura's rich descriptions of Japanese cookery. The markedly British idioms fit perfectly the typically dry humour of Osaka-born Tsumura, and readers of Barton's essay-memoir can find excellent evidence of the translation process she recalls in *50 Sounds* (Fitzcarraldo, 2021) in her rendering of *There's No Such Thing As An Easy Job*. Overall, Barton's receipt of the 2020 English PEN Translates Prize is certainly very well justified.

Ultimately, Tsumura's work shows that, however you wish to see your job, a feeling of *sekininkan*, or personal responsibility, is unavoidable. Although first published in Japan in 2016, *There's No Such Thing As An Easy Job* is apt for our current times, in which we are all working from home and the boundaries of the professional and the domestic feel more liminal than ever. Yet, the book also offers solace in these strange times: after coming face-to-face with what she was fleeing all along, the protagonist's blurred view of reality, meta-reality and the surreal ultimately shows us how hope can appear out of anything. §

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## Handmade in Japan

by Irwin Wong

Gestalten (2020)

ISBN-13: 978-3899559927

Review by David Tonge



'There are wonders to be found up and down the length of the Japanese Archipelago, if you know where to look' (p.6)

If like me you have an appetite for exploring all things related to Japanese design and crafts, Irwin Wong's introduction to *Handmade in Japan* will surely prompt you to investigate further. Wong is a well-known

commercial photographer based in Tokyo, so on the book's announcement I knew it would be filled with evocative images of Japan and its craftspeople. And given publisher Gestalten's reputation for beautiful design and craft monographs I simply had to buy it.

Like many books of its kind, it is divided into geographical chapters from Hokkaido in the North to Kyushu in the south. This allows you to dive in at random according to your interest in either craft or region. Each chapter begins with a brief introduction of that region explaining the interconnectivity of geographical, political and historical factors that shape it, its crafts and industries up to the present day. For example, Kyushu's proximity to Korea via the Korean



Straits and Taiwan in the Southwest led to a region adept at trading with and ultimately becoming a gateway to foreign cultures. This was instrumental in the development of Japan's thriving export ceramic industry and conversely the introduction of overseas design, materials and taste to the Japanese consumer. If you are lucky enough to visit Fukuoka in Kyushu, you will be able to feel these influences on its architecture, food and fashion.

In each case Wong describes in simple language the fascinating relationship of Japan's natural resources – clay, bamboo, water etc – to each of the regions, therefore explaining the growth of regionally specific crafts. Those of us who have spent any time in Japan will know that each region has its own *meibutsu* (specialities), often in the form of edible gifts at railway stations. But if you ever wondered why for example, Gifu makes great *wagasa* (Japanese paper umbrellas), this book shines a light on the complex relationships that combine to make this possible.

There are many books about Japanese crafts. As a designer with a 25-year connection to Japan I have read many of these. My usual 'go to' is *Japanese Crafts by the Japan Craft Forum*, published by Kodansha. Like Wong's it navigates Japan's craft culture region by region and while it is incredibly thorough it is also rather academic. This is great if you are writing a thesis, but it is unlikely to get you planning your next trip! In contrast where *Handmade in Japan* scores highly is its focus on the craftspeople and their personal stories. These stories are warm and engaging giving the reader an insight into the lives, sacrifices and in many cases the generational commitment families have made to their craft and the region they live.

Wong uses his photography and simple descriptions to highlight the processes used to create these wonderful objects, often orally transmitted, generation after generation. For instance, If you were, sadly, never able to visit the castle town of Miyakonojo in Kyushu to observe traditional long bow making, after reading Wong's description you would be able to understand the fundamentals of the process and the environment within which it flourished. And furthermore, after hearing bow maker Kusumi Sumihiro say 'I've concluded that this shape is the best after 33 yrs of experience' (p.20) you would begin to understand the patience and commitment required to be a craftsman in Japan.

All of these makers stories are well drawn but a particular favourite of mine is that of Tokyo's Sumida based *tabi* (Japanese socks) maker Meugaya. Owner

Ishii Yoshikazu is one of the last remaining bespoke sock makers in Japan. From his shop in Sumida, an area known for its many artisans, this fifth-generation artisan, his wife and son are involved in every stage of the process. In order to make a pattern they painstakingly measure their customers feet in 20 places on each foot, ensuring the *tabi* fit perfectly. Many stages later and after completion the *tabi* are worn for 3 months as a trial pair before adjustments are made. New customers are required to order 6 pairs thereafter the measurements are ready to make further pairs. With clientele from the nearby geisha community and luminaries from the Kabuki theatre world Meugaya stays in business due to its unbelievable customer service.

What I love about this particular story is the combination of craft and commerce which for me encapsulates the Japanese mercantile mind set – craft is not just for looking at, it's not for art's sake. It needs to function well, sell and in many cases maintain the family tradition. Each of the 33 stories are 2-4 pages in length and at the end of each chapter Wong has included a primer on a material or process symbolic of both the region and Japan's cultural identity for example, bamboo, *washi* (Japanese paper), indigo dyeing and *urushi* (lacquerware).

*Handmade in Japan* would grace any bookshelf and given the resurgence of interest in hand craft techniques and Japanese culture, particularly amongst young people, its publication is timely. It takes us on a journey from long bows to lacquerware, stopping en-route to explore kites, umbrellas, candles, fishing boats, Noh masks and much more. But it is more than a guidebook. Beautifully designed and illustrated, it is a love letter from Wong to the Japanese craftspeople who are the guardians of centuries old processes, and to the artefacts which make tangible the historical, geographical and human characteristics of the Japanese archipelago.

It's a must have for any lover of design, craft or Japanese culture and while it is not an encyclopaedic record of all Japanese crafts, it is surely one of the most accessible. My only selfish wish is that Gestalten would publish a small or digital version so that next time I am in Japan with a spare weekend I could refer to it before heading to the travel agent! In summary, to quote Wong:

'Japanese crafts are alive and evolving, this book is a tour around the different craft regions of Japan, bringing you inside the workshops of these wonderful dedicated people.'(p. 6) §