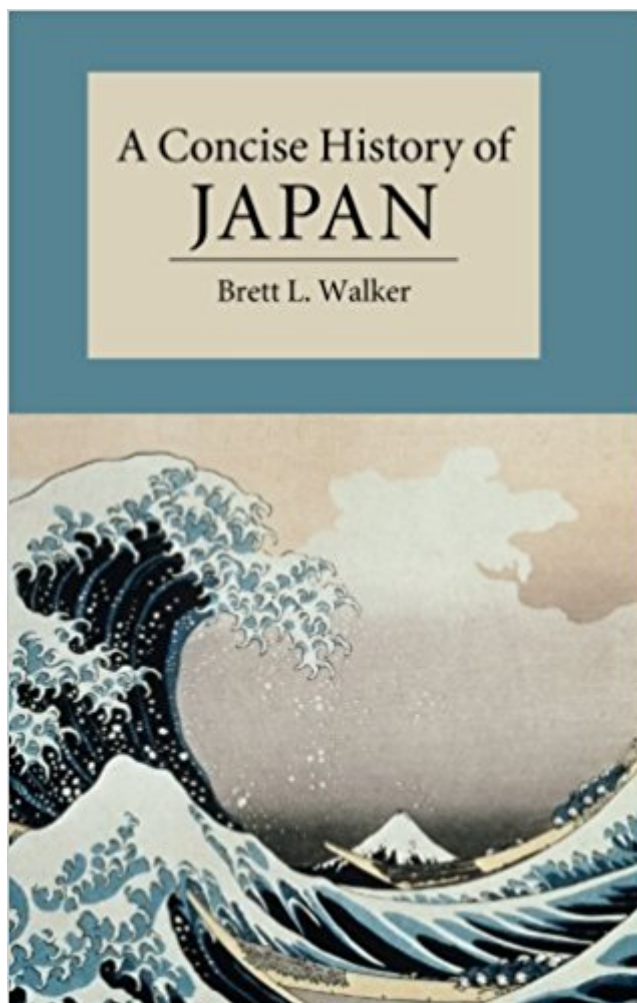


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# A Concise History Of Japan (Cambridge Concise Histories)



## Synopsis

To this day, Japan's modern ascendancy challenges many assumptions about world history, particularly theories regarding the rise of the west and why the modern world looks the way it does. In this engaging new history, Brett L. Walker tackles key themes regarding Japan's relationships with its minorities, state and economic development, and the uses of science and medicine. The book begins by tracing the country's early history through archaeological remains, before proceeding to explore life in the imperial court, the rise of the samurai, civil conflict, encounters with Europe, and the advent of modernity and empire. Integrating the pageantry of a unique nation's history with today's environmental concerns, Walker's vibrant and accessible new narrative then follows Japan's ascension from the ashes of World War II into the thriving nation of today. It is a history for our times, posing important questions regarding how we should situate a nation's history in an age of environmental and climatological uncertainties.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"This is the best short survey of Japanese history available today: timely in its focus on environmental issues but timeless in its sound scholarship, rich in detail but thoroughly readable and eloquent in its interpretation of Japan's complex past." William M. Tsutsui, Hendrix College, Washington  
"This is a textbook for our times from one of the leading scholars in the field. From humanity's deep history in the archipelago to the massive crisis of March 2011, Walker's history recasts the central themes of the Japanese past. Samurai scientists, wartime zealots, and the nation's vibrant post-war popular culture are placed in global context and enlivened through clear

prose. Each chapter is concise, accessible and rooted in the latest scholarship. I can think of no finer text that covers the full range of Japan's past." Ian Jared Miller, Harvard University, Massachusetts

"In crisp, clear prose, Brett Walker's *A Concise History of Japan* provides a sweeping view of Japan's past distinctively framed by world history and, most crucially, by environmental challenges." Julia Adeney Thomas, University of Notre Dame, Indiana

"Brett Walker's *A Concise History of Japan* is a new national survey geared to the global Anthropocene. Alert to the many forces that threaten our planet's future, the author - a leading environmental historian in his own right - takes a critical look at the long sweep of the Japanese past. The result is a fast-paced account of the archipelago's development and its discontents, at once brisk and brooding." Karen Wigen, Stanford University, California

"A lucid exploration of the way that the peoples of the Japanese archipelago have shaped and been shaped by their environment, from the extinction of big game to the grave disaster and diseases that accompanied industrialization every step of the way." Morgan Giles, *The Times Literary Supplement*

"Walker's new history of Japan reflects a deep appreciation of the issues of concern to today's readers. This is a history of Japan unlike anything published so far in the attention given to the impact of disease, famine, deforestation, climate change, environmental pollution, and natural disasters on the story of the Japanese and their relationship with their country. In a clear, readable style, the author expertly narrates the course of Japanese history, reflecting the most recent scholarship available. Along the way, he discusses topics not included in previous histories of Japan, such as the introduction and impact of both disease and medical knowledge in the premodern era, the rise of the Japanese fishing 'pelagic empire' in the twentieth century, and the global impact of Japan's 'soft culture' in recent decades ... Summing up: essential." M. D. Ericson, *Choice*

*A Concise History of Japan* integrates the pageantry of Japanese history with today's environmental concerns, including climate change, rising sea levels, violent Pacific storms, and devastating tsunamis. It explores the changing environmental conditions that have shaped Japanese history, and how Japan has in turn shaped our changing environment.

Very well written. Good enough for pleasure reading. Makes you feel like you were there.

I loved the book. Easy to read and it flowed really well.

By far, the most concise book on Japan's history ever. Its super contemporary, offers a modern look

at history, and full of interesting facts. A must have if you like or study Asian Cultures, or histories.

good info

So impressed with the quality of this book. Great!

Japanese history probably evokes an especially strong curiosity for westerners. Somehow this small archipelago managed to stand up to the west, and other "Great Powers," more than once. True, its most recent stand originated in nefarious imperial fascism and ultimately ended in disaster, but that makes the question as to how Japan arrived at that point all the more intriguing. The island nation has a long, complex and utterly fascinating history with evidence of human habitation stretching back at least to the Pleistocene. It encountered so much upending change over such a vast time span that any book called "A Concise History of Japan" sounds almost like a dare. Regardless, this single volume of some 300 pages in the Cambridge "Concise History" series pulled it off. Its density matches its comprehensiveness. Starting with the migration of hominids some 2.6 million years ago across then existing land bridges, it covers voluminous major events and historical figures up to the current Heisei period and the horrifying "triple disaster" of 2011. Given this ambitious scope nothing receives extremely detailed coverage, but the narrative includes enough information to maintain a coherent progression throughout, including some very complicated historical transitions. Interesting parallel histories of the status of women and climate change also weave between the stories of Emperors, Shōguns and Samurai. Given Japan's watery location, the book heavily emphasizes the role of climate and ecology in the country's history and future. The final chapter focuses on Japan's role in the Anthropocene and the ominous challenges it faces as global sea levels inexorably rise. This relatively recent trajectory dates back to the 19th century as Japan joined the world's industrial powers, or at least attempted to. Prior to that, its lands consisted largely of warring feudal states ruled by force and rigid class distinctions. Later, sixteenth century unification evolved into a fervent nationalism that eventually erupted into one of humanity's most brutally devastating wars. This book gives an excellent high level view of the amazing plot twists that gradually led to today's Japan. One look at the contents reveals just how much time the book compresses into mere fiber and ink. Chapter one deals with the ancient Jōmon people who lived from 14,500 to 300 BCE. These early hunter-gatherers also made exquisite pottery with an intricacy that still dazzles today. The Yayoi followed them and traded with China, cultivated the landscape and built a basic political structure. Kanji, the beautiful but beguiling written characters, migrated from China to Japan

at this time. A military state called the Yamoato Confederacy arose which featured the first Emperor who ruled "as a god." During the subsequent Nara period remnants of the Jōmon, called the Emishi, were conquered and subdued by the Buddhist theocracy with a new capital in Kyoto. In 737, something that seems like no more than an unfortunate outbreak of smallpox provided the first wave of inoculation against future invasions. More to come on that. The famous Heian period flourished, with its nature poetry, "Tale of Genji," sakura symbolism, kana and steep class divisions, up to the dissolution of its court. A combination of countless rebellions, volcanic eruptions and a relatively weak feudal state led to the rule of the Samurai around 1185. Here Shōgun ruled and the once godly Emperor became a figurehead. Invading Mongols found themselves thwarted twice, but soon things dissolved into Japan's own "Warring States Period." Kyoto crumbled almost to dust during the Ōnin war and "Armed Buddhist Sectarians" spread general chaos. Right around this time another complicated factor introduced itself: the Portuguese. These cunning world conquerors discovered a Japan already immune to smallpox, armed to the hilt and suspicious of their motives. Following a wave of conversions to Christianity and the infamously incriminating "San Felipe Incident," Toyotomi Hideyoshi crucified some Europeans and wrote a stern warning to their rulers that any future "explorers" would meet the same fate. Despite such nastiness, European science rolled into Japan. The sixteenth century saw unification under three of the biggest names in Japanese history: Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Iyasu. Hideyoshi, router of Europeans, also invaded Korea twice with sights on China. Though repelled on the Korean peninsula, he expanded his territory exponentially in Japan proper. This left Tokugawa to bring Japan under single rule after his victory at Sakigawa in 1600. The Tokugawa period endured under the Edo bakufu, its capital relocated to Edo in modern day Tokyo, until the next upheaval in 1868. During this relatively stable period the Japanese subjugated the Ainu in Hokkaido, merchants rose in wealth, a feeling of "Japanese exceptionalism" emerged and the USA arrived. This latest in a series of encounters and the resulting "unequal treaties" helped catalyze the downfall of the Tokugawa Shogunate. 1868 began the era of Japan's modernization. The ensuing "Meiji Restoration" centralized everything around the Emperor. As "blood taxes" were levied and the interests of the state outweighed the interests of individuals, heavy industrialization led to immense growth and prosperity for some and pollution, misery and death for others. Coal and copper laid fertile lands to waste. So much so that Tanaka Shōzō, an early ecological critic, cried that "the government is at war with its own people." Increased militarization led Japan to defeat Russia at Tsushima in 1905. A "colonize or be colonized" ethos led to the Sino-Japanese war in 1895. A "triple intervention" stopped Japan's conquest of Korea. Japan called hypocrisy as racist policies

kept them from joining the "Great Powers." The US passed many laws against Japanese immigration, further angering the growing imperial power. Distrust of "industrial fat cats" resulted from the corruption of "Taishō Democracy" and its subsequent numerous political assassinations. Some called for a return to the Emperor as central figure, which found its resolution in the so-called "Shōwa Restoration" after Emperor Hirohito ascended to the throne in 1926. Things then escalated quickly: secret police, Manchurian occupation, Japan leaves the League of Nations, the Marco Polo bridge incident, Manchukuo puppet state, the Nanjing massacre, pact with European fascists, Pearl Harbor, World War II, Kamikazes, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, unconditional surrender, US occupation. To maintain stability in post-war Japan, the US decided they needed to exonerate Hirohito. General Tōjō took the blame. Japan's new constitution, written by the US, contained "Article 9" or the "no belligerency clause." After the US left in 1952 Japan became a manufacturing powerhouse. Its economy boomed in the 1960s, though several high profile pollution cases displayed the ugly underneath of its success. Things declined substantially in the 1990s. Hello Kitty also receives a brief mention. In the new millennium, troubles with China brewed over the Senkaku islands and Prime Minister Abe Shinzō's visit to Yasukuni shrine. Then multiple disasters struck in 2011 as a magnitude 7.2 earthquake struck off of the coast sending immense waves over heavily populated areas, which also led to the Fukushima nuclear plant meltdowns. This stands as a solemn reminder of Japan's vulnerability as a country made up of islands. As Japan continues to recover from 2011 it faces challenges of extremely low birthrates, over-fishing and the continuing climate change to which it contributes along with much of the west. Recently, some have sought to revise the history of World War II into a less imperialistic version of events. Increasing grievances with China have even led some to question the wisdom of Article 9. Its once fervent doctrine of pacifism has apparently grown some cracks. Yet it successfully markets its popular culture all over the world and maintains a friendly and largely fruitful relationship with its main World War II rival, the United States. "A Concise History of Japan" miraculously loads all of this information, and much more, into a relatively small volume. Hokusai's gorgeous waves provide an inviting prelude to the unforgettable history awaiting inside. Pictures also dot the text, including photos of Jōmon pottery, temples, notable people, pages of manuscripts, a Hiroshima victim and even Godzilla. Five interspersed maps also help locate the action discussed in the narrative. Overall, this book gives a great high-level comprehensive history of this endlessly fascinating country. It obviously can't cover everything, but it does cover an impressive amount.

Very difficult to read. A litany of names and places that overwhelmed, all in service of a political

agenda about modern Japanese society. I couldn't get beyond the Shogun years.

Good historical overview with the addition of an interesting perspective on history by looking at the effect of humans on the environment in Japan and the effect of the changing environment on the history of humans in Japan. Very useful in preparation for a trip to Japan.

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