



The Japanese Consumer: An Alternative Economic History of Modern Japan | Book Reviews

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Penelope Francks, *The Japanese Consumer: An Alternative Economic History of Modern Japan*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xii + 249 pp. \$33 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-521-69932-7.

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The standard economic interpretation of Japanese consumption revolves around the so-called “Japanese consumption problem”: domestic consumption demand was weak and has never been a driver of aggregate economic growth. Rather, the main drivers of Japan’s economic growth have been — depending on whose account you read — either domestic investment or exports. Japan’s famed miracle growth is basically a supply side story of productivity growth in heavy manufacturing — iron and steel, chemicals, heavy machinery — driven by imported technology, structural change involving the draining of rural labor out of villages into a burgeoning industrial belt, and the exploitation of scale economies through exports. In this book Penelope Francks rejects the standard explanation, emphasizing an alternative story, one revolving around the evolution of consumer demand, a story in which housewives as opposed to male factory workers play a dominant role.

Francks sets the stage for her demand-driven, bottom-up, thesis in Chapter 1 with two arguments: the consumer revolution in eighteenth century England was as important as the incipient industrial revolution (suggesting that the same holds for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Japan prior to its forcible opening up by the Western powers); and Japanese consumption cannot simply be understood in terms of the growing penetration of Western goods and preferences. Rather Japan's consumption history is unique and needs to be told from the bottom-up focusing on household demand for foodstuffs, clothing, household furnishings, and leisure activities. One of the great virtues — indeed pleasures — of the book is concreteness partly achieved through detailed description, partly achieved through the presentation of numerous reproductions of woodblock prints and photographs mostly taken by the author's husband. Accounts of how and where Japanese eat their dinners, where and how they sleep in cramped apartments, how a Tokyo family manages to extract the maximum impact out of a tiny driveway (where they squeeze an automobile, drying laundry and a garden) bring home the realities of consumption in Japanese consumer culture to the reader. Those interested in the specifics of Japanese lifestyles — historically and in the contemporary world — will be well served by this volume.

The next two chapters demonstrate that consumerism spread in late Tokugawa Japan. Chapter 2 deals with cities, Chapter 3 with rural village life. A key argument developed in these chapters is that consumerism gradually spread outward geographically — from castle towns in the fiefs and from great metropolitan centers like Edo and Osaka under the shogun's administration — and downward socially, city merchants (and later wealthy farmers in rural districts) imitating the behavior of the samurai elite. Promoting this consumer demonstration effect was the sankin kōtai system whereby daimyō and their selected samurai retainers were required to attend the shogun's court in Edo on an alternating schedule. Commoners observed the elite travelling back and forth from sophisticated Edo to the hinterland in their finery and accompanied by their possessions. As their per capita incomes improved during the closing century of the Tokugawa period (1750-1868), commoners began purchasing the commodities and services originally reserved for the elite. Attempts to restrict the consumption of elite clothing — sumptuary edicts issued by the shogun's administration — were evaded by city merchants and villagers alike. Trickle down was alive and well during the twilight decades of the Tokugawa shogun.

With the opening up of Japan and the establishment of the treaty ports in late Tokugawa and early Meiji Japan the consumer demonstration effect evolved, becoming two pronged, dualistic. On the one hand Japanese began imitating the consumer behavior of the Westerners living in the treaty ports: beer consumption and clothing fashioned from broad looms favored by the Americans, Dutch and English living in the treaty port enclaves caught on among the Japanese. On the other hand as per capita incomes rose among the Japanese — fostered by the introduction of Western-style technology and by welfare gains associated with the abandonment of autarky — the diversity and quality of traditional products consumed by the elite leaped, stimulating imitation among a growing middle class. In short the evolution of Japanese consumerism became increasingly dualistic, on the one hand reflecting Westernization, on the other hand reflecting a breathtaking explosion in the already well entrenched arena of traditional Japanese goods. Testifying to this dualism was the proliferation of goods that combined Western manufacturing techniques — and often reflected Western consumer tastes in design and presentation — with the creation of domestic Japanese products, spawning hybrids neither

completely Western or completely Japanese. Picture a Japanese businessman wearing a Western-style suit, sporting a watch and spectacles, while walking on wooden geta worn by earlier generations of Tokugawa era elites and commoners alike; picture a Japanese bride wearing a silk kimono produced in a steam-driven factory. Francks ably tells this seemingly contradictory story in Chapter 4 of her book.

Chapter 5 takes us through the interwar years, emphasizing the spread of suburbs and department stores associated with the proliferation of inter-city electric railroads and intra-city trams allowing commuters to trek into great industrial belt metropolises like Yokohama, Nagoya and Kobe to work during the day, returning to bedroom communities chock a block with rice producing villages in the evenings. Once again, as in the Tokugawa period, urban consumerism spread out to embrace rural Japan.

The dark valley of World War II, the American Occupation and the consumer revolution during Miracle Growth (1955-1975) is the subject of Chapter 6. The focus is on consumer durables, especially those employing electricity. Life in the high-rise danchi apartments built in profusion through Japan's Honshū industrial belt stretching from the Tokyo/Yokohama conurbation in the north through Nagoya and Toyota City to the Osaka/Kyoto/Kobe complex in the southwest provides the concrete stage on which the electric household consumer revolution is described.

Finally Chapter 7 takes up the era of the rise in the yen/dollar exchange rate and the bubble economy that burst in the early 1990s. In this chapter Francks focuses on the diffusion in automobile ownership, globalization of consumerism — a subtle discussion of a Japanese chef imitating a French chef who specializes on producing French-cuisine-infused Japanese food is a specially clever vehicle for telling the story of globalization of preferences — and growing dissatisfaction with globalized materialism spawning a boom in nostalgia for the products of the Tokugawa past. Chapter 8 summarizes the argument of the book and a Statistical Appendix presents seven useful tables, most drawn from aggregate level features of consumption demand.

An economist might quibble with some of the analysis in the account given by Francks. Much of her discussion can be decomposed into income and relative price effects: Engel's Law and the income and price elasticity of demand can account for many of her examples. An economist would be tempted to analyze Japanese demand for quality and diversity in consumption in terms of hedonic price theory, and so forth. But this quibbling would be unfair to Francks, who is an historian of culture. Her richly illustrated volume makes a strong case for an alternative interpretation of Japanese economic development, one that economic historians should take seriously in the years to come.

Carl Mosk is Professor of Economics at the University of Victoria. His most recent books are *Japanese Economic Development: Markets, Norms, Structures* (Routledge, 2007/2008) and *Traps Embraced or Escaped: Elites in the Development of Modern Japan and China* (World Scientific, 2010, forthcoming).

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