

Suggested Reading List for Japan

Books

Japanese Culture (*Professor Varley*)

Don't be misled by the rather terse title, this remains among the most versatile primers on Japanese history and culture. Now in its fourth edition, Professor Varley (both Columbia and the University of Hawaii) sticks to the topic introducing Japanese cultural development through a chronological review of the island nation's history. The strength of this book is that it is informative and accessible for the reader looking for a general introduction and strong enough for readers with some previous foundation in Japanese studies.

A Brief History of Chinese And Japanese Civilizations (*Conrad Schirokauer*)

This compelling text explores the development of China and Japan through their art, religion, literature, and thought as well as through their economic, political, and social history. This author team combines strong research with extensive classroom teaching experience to offer a clear, consistent, and highly readable text that is accessible to students with no previous knowledge of the history of East Asia.

Japan: True Stories of Life on The Road (*Donald Richie, Alan Booth, et al.*)

This is a thoroughly wonderful and refreshing look at Japan from the varying perspectives of different writers who, in spite of their varied perspectives all share a love for Japan. The book's greatest strength and value to the reader is its ability to highlight so many aspects of Japan – funny, serious, bewildered and romantic. Included are some now famous pieces like Pico Iyers, "The Lady and the Monk" and Cathy Davidson's delightful, "36 Views of Mount Fuji".

Japan: Profile of A Nation (*Kodansha America Inc. and Kodansha International*)

A virtual encyclopedia of Japan this hefty volume presents 250-featured entries on topics Japanese – from the expected (history, culture, business) to the unusual (comic book culture, cram schools and karaoke). The well-organized presentation by topic (with additional supplementary articles) allows the reader to choose those topics of interest. Also includes a comprehensive index in both Japanese and English as well as such seemingly curious supplements as the Japanese Constitution (in case you were wondering).

Tokyo for Free (*Susan Pomplan*)

An ambitious, easy to follow guide that is more than just a list of things to do in Tokyo – Susan Pomplan has provided visitors with a refreshing guide on how to experience Tokyo from attending a temple ceremony to seeing traditional crafts being made. Good directions and numerous suggestions.

Japanese Inn (*James Michener*)

James Michener wrote (in his autobiography, "The World is My Home") that Statler's "Japanese Inn" was a minor classic that he could not improve upon. Using a unique conceit of a historic Japanese Inn, Statler weaves and wonderful story that spans the breadth of Japanese history from the 15th – 20th centuries.

Looking for The Lost: Journeys Through A Vanishing Japan (*Alan Booth*)

Englishman Alan Booth, a keen student of Japanese language and culture, walked from Sata (the southern most point in Kyushu) to Cape Soya, the northernmost point of Japan on Hokkaido in 1982. His odyssey took 128 and brought him into contact with Japanese from all walks of life. This charming journal of his trip succeeds in being both an informative travelogue and an affectionate and wry portrait of the Japanese today from urban businessman to the rural farmer.

The Tale of Genji (*Arthur Waley*)

Considered one of the world's first true novels, the 11th century tale of Genji, the "shining prince" has been translated into English on three occasions – in 1933 by Arthur Waley and in 1976 by Edward Seidensticker and now this latest, and agreed to be most masterful version, by Royall Tyler. The story traces the life, loves and death of the prince set against the complex code of conduct at the Heian court in Kyoto. This is listed for those travelers who have the time and interest to delve deeper into Japanese culture through its recognized prose masterpiece.

Distant Thunder: A Novel of Contemporary Japan (*Wahei Tatematsu and Lawrence J. Howell*)

If the hefty tome of ancient court life in Japan is beyond you the opt for this moving novel of life in contemporary Japan as seen through the eyes of its hero, Mitsuo Wada, a young, principled farmer who clings to the dream of holding on to his farm. For travelers going to Japan this book provides an introduction to rural life, an area give scant exposure in the west (and despite Japan's remarkable modern development, the rural population still exceeds the urban numbers).

Memoirs of A Geisha (*Arthur Golden*)

In spite of more recent criticism from the Geisha who inspired the story, "Memoirs of a Geisha" is an exceptionally entertaining novel that was a huge success in the United States when it appeared in 1999. Arthur Golden admirably succeeded in spinning the tale of Sayuri, the young daughter of a fisherman who is sold into one of Kyoto's Gion Geisha houses and begins a fascinating and often capriciously cruel education in the art of being a geisha. Easy to read and consistently interesting it opens the door on an unusual and complex world unknown to most western readers.

Films

Taxing Woman (1987)

A cult classic, the story of a headstrong tax official who stops at nothing in getting her man.

Late Spring (1972)

Yasujiron Ozu's moving story of a young woman's attempts to stop her father from putting into an arranged marriage – wonderful reflection of traditional values.

Village of Dreams (1996)

Director Yoichi Higashi's delightful story of twins (based on his early experiences with his twin brother) is a gentle and warm look at life in rural Japan.

After Life (1998)

An unusual story that is drawn from the director's interviews with 500 people on what one memory they would take with them to heaven.

Ran (1985)

Akira Kurosawa's classic restaging of the King Lear tale to 16th century Japan.

Rashomon (1951)

More than a cinema classic Kurosawa's engrossing story of rape and murder (starring his favorite actor, Toshiro Mifune) told from four different viewpoints, became a movie device used in many subsequent films made around the world.

Yojimbo (1961)

Another Kurosawa classic that stars Mifune as a wandering Samurai for hire who works both sides for his own means – this film inspired the "spaghetti westerns" of Sergio Leone that starred Clint Eastwood.