

100 Books for Understanding Contemporary Japan

Japanese popular culture, from manga and animation to cuisine and fashion, is becoming increasingly popular among people of all ages overseas. Some of these people, curious to find out the real story about Japan will come to the country in person, yet this avenue is not open to the vast majority. What could be an alternative way to understand modern Japanese society and thought?

There are many sources of information about Japan: print, broadcasts, and the internet, to name but a few. These media do portray Japan after a fashion, however the key is being able to find reliable and intellectually stimulating opinions and insights. The book is an important medium that gives us a valuable opportunity to think and reflect. How, then, does one go about finding a truly reliable book?

To simplify the process of hunting down authoritative works on Japan, The Nippon Foundation set in motion a book program, the first step of which was to ask ten experts with extensive knowledge of the country to select 100 books to serve as useful guides for those who want to understand present day Japan but find themselves in the unfortunate situation of having no, or restricted, access to quality reading material.

During the selection process, the committee members were able to draw on entirely different backgrounds and points of view, having experience in business, academic, media, government, cultural, and NGO-related circles. The 100 books look at Japan from every angle, giving the reader an introduction to one of the most complex societies in the world. A complete catalogue listing the 100 books, with accompanying summaries, is now available in print form and on The Nippon Foundation's website (<http://www.nippon-foundation.or.jp/eng/>). The catalogue includes books on Japan on such topics as foreign policy, business and management, society and culture, films and animation, classic and contemporary literature, and history. Most of the books listed are recent publications, but some older classics have been included to give a better appreciation of the historical background of the nation. A serious, concentrated reading of these 100 books will add up to an extensive education on the topic of modern Japan.

In the first phase of this book program, books listed in the catalogue will be donated to 300 selected key libraries, universities, and institutions in USA, most of which do not have collections of books on Japan despite having potential readers who would benefit from them. Although the project will focus on the USA in 2009-10, it will be expanded to Asia, Europe and the rest of the world in future years.

Assembling and distributing this first collection is just the first phase of the book project. Some of the best books about Japan are not currently available in English translation, and some are out of print. In the next phase of this ambitious educational project, a second wave of books will be translated into English, and publishers will be asked to reprint unavailable books. The fruits of these efforts will then enrich the collection with more fine titles that open the door to a deeper understanding of contemporary Japan.