

Understand Japan

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The stubborn economy, increased civic engagement and an influx of tourists are making headlines.

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Japan's geisha, skilled in traditional music and dance, are aesthetes of the first degree.

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Japan Today

The stubbornly stagnant economy and a shrinking population (projected to decline by one-third in the next half-century) have been a near constant backdrop for political discussion in Japan for decades. Was the post-WWII miracle growth a fluke, or could Japan pull it off again – ideally in time for the 2020 Olympics? There have been glimmers of hope on the economic front, but no one is popping champagne. Meanwhile, the 2011 earthquake has had the unexpected legacy of increased civic engagement.

Best on Film

Osaka Elegy (Mizoguchi Kenji; 1936) A modern girl makes her way in Osaka.

Tokyo Story (Ozu Yasujiro; 1953) Portrait of a family in rapidly changing, post-WWII Japan.

Lost in Translation (Sofia Coppola; 2003) Disorienting, captivating Tokyo through the eyes of two Americans.

Adrift in Tokyo (Satoshi Miki; 2008) Two luckless antiheroes on a long walk through the city.

Best in Print

A Different Kind of Luxury (Andy Couturier; 2010) Life lessons from Japanese who choose time and freedom over wealth.

The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan (Ian Buruma; 1994) A comparison of the postwar psyche in Japan and Germany.

The Book of Tokyo: A City in Short Fiction (Edited by Michael Emmerich, Jim Hinks and Masashi Matsuie; 2015) Ten stories by contemporary Japanese writers set in the capital.

Sazae-san (Hasegawa Machiko; 1946–74) Long-running manga (Japanese comic) of manners starring a plucky postwar housewife.

The Olympics

When the International Olympic Committee announced in 2013 that Tokyo would host the 2020 Summer Olympics, it felt like the first good news Japan had heard in ages. Now the media could talk about fun things again – like new stadium designs! The enthusiasm didn't last long though: with construction costs for the Zaha Hadid-designed stadium spiralling out of control, the government scrapped it in favour of a cheaper-to-make design by Kuma Kengo. While many locals disliked the Hadid stadium – saying it looked like a giant bicycle helmet – nobody is terribly excited about Kuma's either (which has been compared to a hamburger). With costs still snowballing, firm-fisted Tokyo governor Koike Yuriko has sent more plans back to the discussion table – and possibly the chopping block.

On a darker note, victims of the 2011 earthquake, who lost homes (and even whole communities) in the tsunami or to radiation have grown increasingly resentful, still living in temporary housing while public funds are spent on showpiece projects. Statistics from the Reconstruction Bureau report that as of 2016, there were still more than 100,000 (the majority of whom are from Fukushima) who are still living in temporary housing.

The Nuclear Power Dilemma

More than five years after the meltdown at the Fukushima nuclear power plant, nuclear power is still a hot topic. Before 2011, 30% of Japan's power was nuclear; by 2013, due to a combination of scheduled maintenance and revamped safety inspections, all reactors were offline. Carbon emissions rose 14% as Japan resorted to burning more oil. The government wants Japan back on the nuclear grid; in 2015, two reactors in Kyūshū went live, with more scheduled to follow.

Citizens and local governments, however, have been unusually proactive, some taking legal action to prevent