1 Japan and the history of consumption

Visitors to 21st-century Tokyo experience above all a world of goods. Standing at the crossroads of wherever is the currently fashionable shopping district, they will be awed by the constant flow of dedicated consumers and the extraordinary array of goods to be enjoyed in department stores, boutiques and specialist shops. Young people, hurrying about their business or stepping out with their friends, display their individual takes on current fashion, while their elders discreetly show off their designer labels. All around, shop windows, billboards and flashing TV screens give out images of products of every kind. Meanwhile, whole sections of the city are devoted to the practice and enjoyment of consumption in a range of facilities that reaches from the unbelievably expensive bar or exclusive restaurant to the tiniest noodle shop or the sleaziest massage parlour.

Eighteenth-century visitors standing at similar spots in the city then called Edo experienced the same awe. They saw shops – indeed the ancestors of present-day Tokyo’s department stores – selling all kinds of clothes, food and household goods. They admired the outfits of the rich and fashionable or mingled with the crowds of ordinary shoppers; they enjoyed the entertainment offered at the theatre or the geisha house, and they refreshed themselves at eating and drinking establishments that ranged from elegant riverside restaurants and fashionable tea-houses to cheap eateries and open-air bars. Advertisers targeted them with fliers and product placement in prints of celebrities and, like their present-day counterparts, they needed shopping and restaurant guides to help them to decide where to shop and what to eat among all the choices on offer.

From the eighteenth century to the present day, the consumer has existed as an integral part of Japan's economic life, acquiring, utilising and enjoying the ever expanding quantity and range of goods that Japanese producers have created. Once, many of these goods – kimono, sushi, futon and much more – were peculiar to Japan, but by the nineteenth century the range was expanding to include Japanese versions of...
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the goods with which the world of American and European consumers was increasingly populated. Eventually Japanese goods themselves – the products both of ‘Japanese tradition’ and of Japanese high technology – were to become a part of global consumer culture: the electrical goods by means of which Japanese people re-created their everyday lives in the post-Second World War decades were finding their places in Western homes by the 1970s, while in due course Japanese food, fashion and popular culture – noodles and sake, karaoke, manga and anime – translated more or less directly from their Japanese originals, were to spread around the world.

These developments have been intimately tied up with the story of Japanese economic growth over the past two centuries, as well as with the social, political and cultural change that has accompanied the country’s emergence as a major global power. The changing world of goods and their consumers embodies Japan’s economic history – from the first appearance of the thriving commercial economy that had established itself by the early nineteenth century, through industrialisation and the post-Second World War ‘economic miracle’, to emergence as an economic superpower within the global economy of the late twentieth century – as it worked itself out in everyday lives. This world of ordinary things and activities – of food, clothes and household goods; of shopping, cooking, travelling and being entertained; of trying to look nice and live comfortably – may seem far removed from the account of technical change, business management, government institutions and macro-economic policy that is normally taken to represent Japanese economic history. But, as Adam Smith’s famous dictum puts it, ‘consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production’,1 and consumption history can reveal to us what the rise of the Japanese economy has ultimately been about. The aim of this book, in telling the story of the Japanese consumer, is also to illuminate, from the angle of ordinary people and everyday life, the developments that have produced the superpower economy whose goods we all nowadays use and enjoy.

This ‘demand-side’, ‘bottom-up’ approach is not the one to be found underlying the usual account of Japan’s economic history. There, Japanese people typically appear as savers and workers, as managers, entrepreneurs and government bureaucrats, but seldom as those who have eaten, worn and used most of the goods that the Japanese economy has succeeded in producing in ever-greater quantities. Anthropologists and sociologists have lately discovered the contemporary

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1 *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Book IV, Chapter VIII.
Japanese consumer, recognising that the study of consumption behaviour represents a remarkably productive route into an understanding of how Japanese society works. But the consumers they study appear timelessly modern, or post-modern, divorced from any of the historical economic, social or political processes that might have made them what they are today.

This is despite the fact that historians of pre-modern Japan nowadays delight in describing what was undoubtedly a world of consumption to be enjoyed in the great cities that had come into existence by the eighteenth century. The literature of the period tells of the food, clothes, entertainment and luxury goods that were consumed – not just by the elite – in a milieu of rising incomes and shifting status that long pre-dated Japan’s first exposure – from the middle of the nineteenth century – to the modern, industrial, consumerist West. Thereafter, however, the Japanese consumer disappears into a history of saving and investment, technological change and management practice, on the assumption that, through the subsequent years of economic growth and change up to the Second World War, most ordinary people, in the cities and in the villages and small towns of the countryside, were simply engaged in the process of acquiring ‘daily necessities’.2 Once the post-Second World War economic miracle took off, Japanese people at last began to be able to enjoy modern consumer goods – the mass-market electrical products, cars and junk food that their Western counterparts had begun to consume in the pre-war period – but it was still typically for their saving, not their spending, that they were studied and famed.

Underlying this account of Japanese people, throughout their history, as workers and savers for whom goods were simply necessary for survival in the short or long term is the analytical framework once standardly utilised by Japanese historians studying their own country. Here Japanese workers and farmers are seen as necessarily exploited, first by a feudal ruling class, then by a land-owning elite and ultimately by a capitalist bourgeoisie, leaving them with little scope for the purchase, much less enjoyment, of anything other than the necessities of survival. The persistence of very small-scale, peasant-style farm households, many of them renting land from landlords, was seen as evidence of the ‘excess’ population on the land and ‘surplus’ labour, which brought about low wage levels in town and country and restricted the growth of purchasing

2 See, for example, Shimbo and Hasegawa’s standard modern account of the growth of the commercial economy of pre-industrial Japan (Shimbo and Hasegawa 2004: e.g. 164, 177).
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power. Japanese businesses, unable to develop markets for their products at home, sought them overseas in Japan’s pre-war empire and later in the export markets of Europe and the United States. The concept of the ‘narrowness’ of the Japanese domestic market was in this way an important element in the analysis of the links between the economy and the emergence of Japanese imperialism and militarism in the pre-war years, later re-born in the structural relationship between Japan’s high rate of saving (hence low growth in consumption) and the trade surplus that was plaguing its international economic and political relations by the 1980s.

In recent years, a wide range of studies has come to challenge this picture. It is now clear that, for a long period from the late eighteenth century through to the late nineteenth, steady economic growth was taking place in Japan, albeit involving the production, much of it in rural areas, of ‘traditional’ goods using ‘pre-industrial’ technology. As a result, given the low rate of population growth and the inability of the ruling elite to capture all of the benefits of economic growth, living standards were rising, especially in the countryside, as rural households began to acquire the food and drink products, textiles and household goods once available only in the cities.\(^3\) The modern urban industrial growth that took off from the 1890s certainly caused conflict and new inequalities, but it also fostered the gradual diffusion of new consumer goods, alongside continuing growth and change in the consumption of the ‘traditional products’ that still accounted for the bulk of ordinary consumption in urban as in rural households. The rapid growth in incomes produced by the economic miracle of the late 1950s and 1960s, following on from the hardship of the war-time years, encouraged Japanese people to acquire in quick succession the symbols of modern life, from the washing machine and black-and-white television to the family saloon and fancy stereo, while at the same time re-building and increasing their savings. Nonetheless, although the expanding production and distribution of an ever widening range of consumer goods are implicit in any account of Japan’s modern history, the consumption of those goods – and the people who consumed them – rarely merits more than a passing mention.\(^4\)

By the 1980s, Japanese people were at last beginning to be recognised not only as the world’s greatest savers, but also, especially

\(^3\) For a wide range of evidence for rising living standards and quality of life in this period, see Hanley 1997.

\(^4\) A notable exception to this is Simon Partner’s work on electrical goods in the post-Second World War period (Partner 1999).
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as they took advantage of the high-value yen (resulting from the trade surplus) in the luxury stores of London, Paris and Milan, as its most discerning yet voracious consumers. Anthropologists and sociologists began to see in the Japanese consumer the apotheosis of the post-modern consumerist world of signs, dissecting in detail a best-selling novel composed almost entirely in brand names. But the Japanese ladies who queued to stock up at Gucci or Prada, the businessmen who spent unimaginable sums on nights out or golf, and the teenage girls perfectly and universally attuned to the latest craze all seemed to spring from nowhere. Economic historians, brought up on the idea of the ‘narrowness’ of the Japanese market, had nothing to contribute, as Japanese consumers frenziedly spent their way through the rise and collapse of the 1980s ‘bubble economy’.

This book narrates the history of those consumers, demonstrating how its discovery opens up the neglected world of everyday life – of eating and drinking, dressing, furnishing homes and socialising; of women and children as well as their more visible menfolk; of ordinary goods produced elsewhere than in the gleaming, or Satanic, factories and offices of the ‘modern sector’. It was within this world that the material expressions of Western consumerism – from the pocket watches and beef stews that symbolised modernity in the late nineteenth century to the mobile phones and Starbucks lattes of the present day – had to find their place. As subsequent chapters show, Japanese people have been honing their skills and developing their particular tastes and characteristics as consumers for two centuries and more, and their history remains embedded, if we but look for it, in the vibrant post-modern consumerism to be observed on Tokyo streets today.

Japanese consumers are of course not unique in having a history, and this book draws inspiration from the by now large literature on the consumption history of other parts of the world, most significantly the first industrialising nations of Europe and North America. As has been the case with Japan, the economic history of the rest of the industrial world was once largely focused on the ‘supply side’, analysing developments in production, technology, business organisation, trade and government policy from a largely top-down and as far as possible quantitative perspective. However, in the wake of Neil McKendrick’s seminal 1982 paper postulating a ‘consumer revolution’ in eighteenth-century England, historians of ‘the West’ have (re-)discovered consumption, recognising that widespread growth in purchases of food products, clothes

9 See Field 1989.
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and accessories and all kinds of more or less decorative household goods represented, as McKendrick put it, a ‘necessary analogue’ to the industrial revolution. This literature enables us to view Japan within the comparative context of the earlier industrialising countries of the West and opens up a whole range of issues in relation to the role of consumption in the history of the modern world.

For McKendrick, the driving force behind the eighteenth-century consumer revolution had been the possibilities offered – by widening trade, communications and markets, as well as rising cash incomes – for emulation of the goods that had once been the prerogative only of those of wealth or high status. The use of goods to demonstrate status had, of course, a long history, but studies of parts of the world as diverse as Renaissance Italy and Ming China were to find evidence of the growing propensity of the elite to acquire possessions as a means of showing off their wealth and taste and indeed as an enjoyable activity. However, by the eighteenth century, in England and in other parts of Europe, more and more people were finding themselves wanting, and being able to acquire, ‘populuxe’ copies of the fashion accessories – fans, gloves, buckles – and household goods – clocks, mirrors, china – with which the rich were surrounding themselves. In London and Paris alike, shopping was becoming a central part of the urban experience, while superior tourists complained that it was getting impossible to tell from appearances who was servant and who was master or mistress.

However, others argued that emulation alone was not enough to explain the profusion of goods that the evidence suggested was accumulating in the homes of the ‘middling sort’ and indeed others below them on the income scale. Nor could it explain the changing forms in which everyday goods – food and drink, clothes and household goods – were consumed, as social and working lives changed with the growth of cities and of industrial employment. The purchasers of tea services, decorative metal-ware and dining tables and chairs, as of the tea, coffee and sugar to go with them, were carving out for themselves both the material surroundings for new forms of social and family life and the signs of their own identity and respectability in the modern world that was emerging by the nineteenth century.

McKendrick 1982; for a survey of this literature, see Glennie 1995.


For this argument, see Fine and Leopold 1990; for evidence of the growing importance of possessions in England, see Weatherill 1996 and Shammas 1990. For a more recent analysis, see Berg 2005.
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The techniques of mass production that were eventually born out of the industrial revolution accelerated the diffusion of goods, often in new forms, to more and more consumers, giving rise to the mass market and the techniques of distribution and advertising that went with it. As a result, despite the continuing efforts of historians to unearth the long history of the Western consumer, the consumerism with which we are now all familiar has largely come to be viewed as a phenomenon of the modern industrialised world, in which fashion drives the never ending development of new products and people define themselves by means of the goods they consume. The emergence of the consumer has therefore come to be seen as bound up with the availability of the ‘modern’ goods, produced and marketed in ‘modern’ ways, that resulted from the industrial revolution in the West.

For the world beyond the original sites of the industrial revolution, therefore, consumerism, as it is now understood, is something that arrives as part and parcel of the imported industrialisation that brings modern goods to domestic markets. Although it is of course recognised that consumer markets are not the same the world over and are conditioned by ‘cultural’ factors, and while historians of Europe and North America continue to discover earlier and earlier evidence of the existence of the ‘pre-industrial consumer’, the Japanese, and nowadays Chinese and Indian, consumer is still largely defined in terms of his or her purchases of Western fashions, electronic goods, Coca-Cola and McDonald’s. The ‘non-Western consumer’ springs fully formed and without a history into the market for modern consumer goods, and the many areas of consumption activity (and the production that supplies them) apparently unrelated to the ‘Western impact’ are largely ignored by all but intrepid anthropologists.

Consumerism in contemporary Japan clearly embodies many of the features that define its Western counterpart, from the primacy of fashion and advertising in determining consumer choice to the use of goods to signify status and individuality. However, it cannot be assumed that it was only as a result of the impact of the West that Japanese people came to ascribe meaning to goods in these ways, nor that the place of goods within their society is necessarily the same as that elsewhere. Much of their consumption expenditure is still devoted to goods and services which are not to be found, except as exotic imports, in other parts of the world; Japanese and other East Asian consumers are often thought to display an ‘ambivalence’ towards consumption, hence a propensity to save, that is almost incomprehensible in the American or

10 For a critique of this approach, see Trentmann 2004.
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British context; the social ramifications of consumption are argued to weigh more heavily on Japanese consumers than on their individualistic, pleasure-seeking, Western counterparts. All this would suggest that history does indeed condition the pattern of consumption growth and the emergence of the consumer as an aspect of modernity, and that Japan, as the first non-Western nation to achieve industrialisation and modernisation, represents a crucial case study within the comparative context of consumption history.

In presenting such a case study, this book uses a broadly chronological structure within which to describe the evolving world of the Japanese consumer. It begins in what is usually known as the Tokugawa (sometimes Edo) period, the two-and-a-half centuries (from 1600 to 1868) of relative peace, stability and ‘seclusion’ from the Western world when overall government lay in the hands of shoguns from the Tokugawa family. During this time, cities grew up, the market economy developed and growing numbers of people began to work in, and enjoy the products of, the manufacturing and service industries that emerged alongside an increasingly productive agriculture. Most historians now conclude that this ‘traditional’, ‘pre-industrial’ economic expansion continued beyond the overthrow of Tokugawa rule in the 1860s, providing the basis for the growth of the economy until at least the 1890s.

Nonetheless, the breakdown of the Tokugawa seclusion policy, caused by the arrival of Western warships and traders in the 1850s, did result in the first steps towards the introduction into Japan of not just the technology and business structures but also the products and lifestyles that the industrial revolution had generated in the West. It was not until after the turn of the century that these were to have any widespread impact on the everyday lives of most Japanese people, but the late nineteenth century saw the beginnings of the process of accommodating the methods and products of the industrial West into the pre-existing structures of consumption in Japan.

From the 1890s, however, the modern industrialisation and urbanisation initiated by the opening to the West, together with the subsequent establishment, under the Meiji Restoration of 1868, of a new system of government, began to produce significant changes in the ways in which Japanese people led their lives. As more and more of them moved from the traditional family environment of the countryside to work and eventually set up their own households in the towns and cities, so new

11 These issues are raised in an East Asian context in Garon and Macachlan 2006.
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goods were acquired, new kinds of household structure established and new forms of social activity devised. By the time that Japan, by now an imperial power, became embroiled in war in China and the wider Asia Pacific in the late 1930s, half of the population lived in urban areas, relying on the market for all that they consumed and developing urban lifestyles and patterns of consumption, while those who remained in the countryside were becoming less and less immune from the influence of the ‘modern life’ of the cities. Nonetheless, the vast majority of the goods that Japanese people ate and drank, dressed in and furnished their houses with were ‘traditional’ products, though now consumed within the new context of modern urban life.

By 1945, the war effort itself, combined eventually with the effects of bombing and the loss of imperial and international trade, had reduced much of the Japanese population to struggling for subsistence amidst the debris of the economy. Recovery was relatively swift, however, and by the 1950s Japanese people, by now overwhelmingly urban or suburban, were on the road towards the modern consumer lifestyle, under the influence of factors such as the post-war, predominantly American, occupation of their country and the re-opening to trade and communications with the increasingly consumerist Western world. Nonetheless, in the homes that they crammed with electrical goods, Japanese families maintained and adapted many elements of the consumption patterns that had emerged before the war. So they sat down at their new Western-style dining tables, dressed in jeans and T-shirts, to eat rice and side dishes which, though now bought pre-packed from a supermarket and advertised ad nauseam on television, their parents and grandparents would have recognised. By the time that the economic miracle culminated in the bubble economy of the second half of the 1980s, the Japanese consumer was able to spend with abandon, not just on designer handbags and the most expensive golf equipment, but also on connoisseurs’ sake, obscure species of gourmet fish, and rice from the most prized fields in the most prized regions of the country. The long history of consumption in Japan was eventually to reach its apotheosis in the complex consumer life of the contemporary Japanese family.

Within the book’s overall chronological structure, individual chapters will look at the various factors that conditioned the development of consumption in Japan and, through them, at the changing lives within which that consumption took place. Consumption by the trend-setting elite, whether the urban merchant classes of the great Tokugawa-period cities, the ‘modern boys’ and ‘modern girls’ who enjoyed all things Western in the 1920s, or the ‘parasite singles’ with
money to burn in the 1980s, will take up part of the story, but it is ordinary lives in town and country that provide the main focus of attention. Throughout the book, changing consumption patterns in food and drink, clothing and household goods will provide the way into the everyday lives of households and families experiencing pre-industrial growth, modern industrialisation, economic miracle and post-industrialisation. The goods with which such families increasingly surrounded themselves reflect their responses to these changes, as much as they do the supply-side investment and technical change that produced them and the culture of marketing and advertising by means of which they were sold.

For each period, therefore, we will consider how and why goods were acquired and used, within the patterns of everyday life. In order to find evidence of consumption practices, we need to enter areas well beyond those conventionally mined by economic historians. What people bought and used was determined not simply by their absolute and relative incomes, but also by the changing infrastructure within which they lived, worked and shopped; the family patterns and gender roles that structured their day-to-day lives; the popular culture, advertising and media environment that surrounded them; and the prevailing thoughts and ideas conditioning the meanings that material goods, in general and in particular, held for them. However, the existing body of work on Europe and North America demonstrates how the wide range of social, political and cultural factors that came together in the growth of consumption cannot be ignored if we are to understand how economic development and industrialisation have taken place in Japan as in the Western developed world. Some aspects of the growth of consumption as a central element in the emerging modern economy can be understood on the basis of quantitative data (assembled in the statistical appendix), but many can be glimpsed only through the kinds of qualitative evidence produced by anthropologists and ethnographers, literary and cultural scholars and non-economic historians of many kinds.

Of course, the supply side that produced the growing abundance of goods and services available to Japanese consumers matters for any understanding of Japan’s development process and its wider significance as the first non-Western example of industrialisation. However, the demand side offers a different angle on that process, one in which the everyday activities of ordinary people play a significant role. It is this that is the subject of what follows.