What Makes Japan Tick?

Bending Adversity: Japan and the Art of Survival
By David Pilling

David Pilling brilliantly captures the complex world that is post-Fukushima Japan in a single image, a lone pine tree on a beach in Rikuzentakata on the northeast coast. Hundred of years ago, local villagers planted 70,000 black pines to ward off the whims of the tempestuous sea. On March 11, 2011, all but one washed away in the tsunami. The lone surviving pine is actually dead at the roots, but by ingenuous artifice, the villagers keep it standing. So Japan defies its geography and history to “bend adversity” towards not just surviving, but turning survival into an art form.

Pilling’s book casts a backlight on questions of the day — can “Abenomics” end decades of economic stagnation, or can Abe make Japan “strong again” without alienating the neighborhood? But the great strength of Bending Adversity is to turn our gaze away from the image cast by Japan’s government. Pilling focuses instead on a social and cultural level, wrestling with the essential question of what makes Japanese society tick, and what concatenation of forces and quirks form such a unique place.

Pilling, as one might expect of a Financial Times correspondent, treats us to intimate sketches. He recounts his interview with the granddaughter of Class A war Criminal Tojo Hikedi, using just the right correspondent, treats us to intimate sketches. He

All China Wants Is to Be Bigger

By All Means Necessary: How China’s Resource Quest Is Changing the World
By Elizabeth C. Economy and Michael Levi
New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, 296 pages, US$27.95 (Hardcover)

Energy expert Michael Levi and Chinese environment guru Elizabeth C. Economy, colleagues at the Council on Foreign Relations, team up to pen a masterly revisionist account of the nature and implications of China’s colossal demand for resources. Economy knows China’s political system as well as anyone, Levi brings a global energy perspective; this expertise combines to help them write knowledgeably about both ends of the global effects of China’s growth.

Analyzing in depth a topic that gets daily media attention, they dispute both alarmist fears of Chinese predatory behavior as well as Pollyannaish hopes that a new “Beijing Consensus” has emerged. Instead, they map out the “complex terrains” of how unrelenting growth in the world’s second largest economy is transforming not just the digging of coal, piping of gas and shipping of steel, but also global finance, corporate governance, and international labor and environmental standards.

Beijing’s behavior is neither as “disastrous” as critics allege nor as “special” as boosters suggest, they find. Instead, they see the state, companies, and state-owned enterprises hewing largely to established patterns of growing resource-consuming countries. There are important particularities, which the authors detail, but no special “Chinese characteristics” to its rapacious drive to secure the resources necessary for powering continued economic growth.

How China Will Challenge America

The Contest of the Century: The New Era of Competition with China — And How America Can Win
By Geoff A. Dyer
Knopf, 2014, 320 pages, $20.31 (Hardcover)

China is no longer a rising power. It is an already aspiring great power, having left behind tosguong yanhui (literally, “hide the brightness and nourish obscurity”) of the 1980s and the period of peaceful rise in the 1990s. Starting with this premise, Geoff A. Dyer, former Financial Times Beijing bureau chief, postulates a new age of rivalry between the United States and China that takes place on three different fronts — military, political and economic.

On the military front, China is beginning to challenge the dominance of the US in the western Pacific, while on the political and diplomatic front, heavily investing in soft power with the hope of blunting criticism of its authoritarian political system. In the global economy, China’s financial firepower could spark a new cycle of global growth among developing countries. Dyer suggests two priorities for the US in dealing with this new China: the first is to demonstrate that the US is not going anywhere by maintaining a robust military presence in Asia, and constructing a convincing long-term economic agenda that ties the country to Asia. A second priority is the patient, long-term task of fostering new partners in Asia and elsewhere who will support a US-led order. In a world where American dominance is being replaced by a more uncertain balance of power, “the careful diplomacy of building different coalitions of support will become the deciding factor.” This conclusion, however, applies not only to the US, but also to China.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim, Associate Professor at the Korea National Diplomatic Academy and a book review editor for Global Asia.
Imbalances in India’s Way

An Uncertain Glory: India and Its Contradictions
By Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen
Princeton University Press, 2013, 448 pages, $22.47 (Hardcover)

India has had the world’s second fastest economic growth rates for the past two decades, only next to China. This book, however, looks into the lopsided nature of Indian growth, the grave imbalance between economic growth and social development. Why has economic growth over the past two decades in India led to so little increase in wages and incomes for the poorer sections of the population? Jean Drèze, a University of Allahabad professor, and Amartya Sen, Nobel Laureate in economics, posit two answers: the lack of “participatory growth,” and the unavailability and poor quality of public services. The service sector-driven growth of the past two decades has led to jobless growth in the country, with the bulk of the workforce marooned in agriculture and other sectors, where wages and productivity are very low. The authors argue that there should be a “two-way relationship” between economic growth and social development. While growth generates resources to be utilized to expand education, health care, nutrition, social facilities and other essentials of fuller and freer human life for all, the expansion of human capability, in turn, allows a faster expansion of resources and production, on which economic growth ultimately depends. But in the past pattern of economic growth in India, this virtuous circle has been notably absent.

The authors are hopeful about Indian democracy, which they argue has the potential to offer much scope for turning around this and other sore spots of the country. That certainly would be the first step towards remediying them.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim

Into the Ultimate Information Age

Big Data: A Revolution that Will Transform How We Live, Work, and Think
By Viktor Mayer-Shöenberger and Kenneth Cukier
Eamon Dolan/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013, 256 pages, $15.26 (Hardcover)

Big data is changing fundamental aspects of life by giving it a quantitative dimension. Thanks to breakthroughs in information and communications technology in recent decades, and as the Internet adds communications to computers, we now live in a world flooded with information and data. Big data, defined as “things one can do at a large scale that cannot be done at a smaller one,” is changing fundamental aspects of life by giving it a quantitative dimension it never had before. With this core message, Oxford University professor Viktor Mayer-Shöenberger and Kenneth Cukier, data editor for The Economist, depict three shifts in how we analyze information in a big data era: a shift from small samples to “all” the data; the acceptance of less than perfect data accuracy; and a move from causality to correlation. Data now create economic value as a key factor of production alongside labor and capital, in government and academia as well as in business. Thus, the authors argue, big data will force an adjustment to traditional ideas of management, decision-making, human resources and education. They remind us also that big data is as much a tool as it is a resource. Misused or abused, big data could be a “Big Brother,” exacerbating the existing asymmetry of power between corporation and consumer, between state and people. However dazzling big data’s power, “we must never let its seductive glimmer blind us to its inherent imperfections.”

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim

Is Our Future a Game of Poker?

The Climate Casino: Risk, Uncertainty, and Economics for a Warming World
By William Nordhaus
Yale University Press, 2013, 392 pages, US$30 (Hardcover)

As the world’s temperature has risen, so has the book market on climate change. There are over 40,000 titles on the subject. A new book by Yale economist William Nordhaus, who has spent two decades researching the economics and science of climate change, stands apart by the depth of his research and the clarity with which he communicates his findings.

Unlike many environmentalists warning of the end of life as we know it, Nordhaus offers a grounded, measured analysis. He notes the uneven consequences of rising temperatures for different sectors of the economy; non-agricultural sectors of rich countries, he argues, would adapt more easily, leaving poorer, agrarian economies to bear the brunt of a warming planet. The irony is that developed economies responsible for climate change by their emissions don’t pay the price, poorer countries do. Nordhaus proposes positive and negative incentives to make pollution costly and encourage alternative energy.

Our fossil fuel-driven lifestyles are pushing the world towards tipping points, as if we are walking into a casino unmindful of which way the climate dice will roll. Nordhaus suggests there is time “to turn around and walk back.” But nations need to work together, not rely on a few nations to take on the burden of curbing emissions while letting free riders carry on. He says the damage can still be undone at a relatively low cost by establishing an economic mechanism that penalizes carbon emissions, and vigorous efforts to develop low-carbon technologies.

This is a sobering and important book.

Reviewed by Nayan Chanda, Editor of YaleGlobal Online and a Global Asia Editorial Board member.

The Spinning World

A Global History of Cotton Textiles, 1200–1850
Edited by Giorgio Riello and Prasannan Parthasarathi
Oxford University Press, 2011 (reprint), 489 pages, US$44.97 (Paperback)

The fluffy white flowers that were once the main raw material for international trade and that fueled the Industrial Revolution have finally found the global recognition they deserve. In a rich collection of essays, scholars from different disciplines tell the story of how cotton woven into clothes in India some 5,000 years ago took over world trade.

Three percent of global trade today consists of textiles, even if cotton has lost some its cache with the rise of synthetic fiber. This volume, edited by Giorgio Riello and Prasannan Parthasarathi, is a treasure trove of information about cotton in the world pre-Industrial Revolution, which turned cotton into a truly global product. Cotton planting, bowing, ginning and spinning technologies from India reached Southeast Asia and China in the middle of the 13th century, although India itself got the spinning wheel from the Middle East. Early on, Indian manufacturers learned to adapt exports to buyers’ taste, whether in Europe or Japan. Indian exports blossomed as the European elite were caught in a “calico craze.” The book also lays to rest popular myths: The idea that cheap washable cotton underwear improved the hygiene of the wool and hemp-wearing Europeans, is, it seems, exaggerated. 18th century English undies weren’t woolen, and people washed their linen shirts and trousers more often than is often imagined.

Reviewed by Nayan Chanda
When Pyongyang’s Nukes Work

Despite the dense title, Hangzhou University political scientist Gregory Moore has compiled a stimulating, readable collection of essays premised on the rising likelihood of a full-fledged nuclear North Korea.

This book might more simply go by When Pyongyang Gets the Bomb. Of course, Kim Jong Un already has up to a dozen nuclear devices of some fashion, but as the authors discuss in technical detail, there are still critical leaps to make in terms of detonation and delivery before full “operationality” is achieved. Leading scholars from South Korea, Japan, Russia and the US think through the implications in their respective capitals should that day come, with editor Moore writing as an honorary Chinese to calculate Beijing’s response. They tend to pessimism, but many contributors leave some hope for smart policy options that could delay the moment of reckoning, mitigate its effects, or find a formula to get the toothpaste back in the tube, as it were. Moore has the most ambitious proposal: for Washington to call Pyongyang’s bluff with a “pre-emptive” normalization of relations and a peace treaty, and by addressing the roots of North Korean insecurity, coax them back onto the road to denuclearization. At the other extreme, Andrei Lankov argues with his usual Tolstoyan fatalism that only regime collapse can stop Pyongyang storming the gates of the nuclear club.

The diversity of views enriches and enlivens the book, and the contributors make a convincing case that it is an issue demanding a wider audience.

Reviewed by John Delury, an Assistant Professor of International Studies at Yonsei University in Seoul and book review editor for Global Asia.