

Alex Kerr Dogs and demons; the fall of modern Japan
Penguin books, 2001

His book 'Lost Japan' [Lonely Planet 1996 / 2009] already did set the tune. Both books by the way are also available in Japanese.

If one 'loves' Japan in a sentimental way, this descriptive analysis might be a good tool to become seriously depressed. I mean, what's behind the official face, hardly can be digested. One reads about perverting a nation, it's fatal decline, it's meltdown, enduring the unendurable and the monsters, which cause this. For sure, this book is no Japan bashing, on the contrary, the author cares more about the nation than the whole Japanese bureaucracy.

Though already 10 years 'old', it's most revealing, describing the manifold old dirty tricks extensively. The output is terrifying: submissive citizenry, ignorant students, a strangled and ravaged nature, waste without limits, toxic pollution, debts beyond imagination, cooked books, lying / hiding / empty wording / patronizing people / inefficiency / alienation / masochism / environmental destruction / male made ugliness / inertia, downgrading Kyoto, self enriching of [mind you] so called civil servants, concrete and construction mafia practices under the protective wings of politicians and bureaucrats, the list is long, but the items are essentially negative and parasitical of character. All this despite tens of millions of Japanese' fear, despise and anger.

Japan's crisis of the 1990s fails to modernize; may be more precise: Japan refuses.

The construction mania and addiction causes huge, sterile and costly projects, a pain for the eye and an insult to common sense, state sponsored vandalism, simultaneously being an extra steady income for politicians and bureaucrats. Officialdom is more or less above the law; call them 'untouchables'. It's the way one does it in a Banana Republic.

Handling finances is beyond anybody's understanding, risky, silly, illusive

and that's no compliment, for sure. This book demystifies Japan.

Kerr describes the underlying factors of Japan's inexplicable tailspin in the 1990s, the pathological rigidity [‘once a concept, always a concept’], Promethean energy and the ‘Law of No Surprises’, which ‘legitimizes’ total control.

He introduces among others two concepts by which pretty many irregularities can be explained and understood, though understanding is another word than accepting. *Tatemae* and *honne* stand for respectively an official stated position, c. q. real intent. *Tatemae* is the ideal, the wish to be, in my eye a pure romantic level. Romanticism however is essentially negative, because it is about [desiring] what is not real. The result is [addictive] phantasmagoria, which easily leads to wrong decisions, destruction or a World War for instance.

Unfortunately, Tepco's March 11 prove of arrogance and incompetence, playing the role of Icarus, is the latest showcase, that Japan refuses to learn to an extent, which I call criminal.

Having traveled myself quietly from the one to the other end of this archipelago for many years, having visited most prefectural- and capital offices, *bunka* coordinators and -halls, artists in many fields, having read many books and newspaper articles, seen many movies and documentaries, I gathered quite some impressions. Kerr's black book offers me a supplementary systematic outlay, a solidly grounded insight, which I must confirm, reading, but with a bleeding heart.

Yes,

‘Wa’~pan misses the boat, many boats, and the merry-go-round-and-round.

Dolf van Graas.

June 2011.

Like quotes ?

“The facts about much of Japan’s social, political, and financial life are hidden so well that the truth is nearly impossible to know.” (104)

“Traditionally, in Japan “truth” has never been sacrosanct, not do “facts” need to be real, (,,)” (104)

“*Tobashi* is a form of make-believe in which Japan’s banks pretend to have hundreds of billions of dollars that they don’t have.” (108)

“What we see is officialdom that is confused, lazy, and behind the times, leading to incredible blunders in the management of everything from nuclear plants to drug regimens and pension funds.” (130)

“Information is unreliable, knowledge of new techniques used abroad scarce, and public funds distributed not to the sectors that need them but to those who pay bureaucrats the most –in this dim twilight world, Japanese officials are losing touch with reality. (145)

“The *tatema*” may not reflect objective truth, but it describes the way things are supposed to be, and that is more important.” (248)

“As Ian Buruma comments, “The main victims of the bigoted, exclusive, rigid, racist, authoritarian ways of Japanese officialdom are not the foreigners, even

though they are at times its most convenient targets, but the rank and file of the Japanese themselves.”(356)

“Bureaucracy is the core institution of government, for its mission is to intelligently allocate the recourses of the state. If it provides that service efficiently, it does its job. Japan’s bureaucracy, riven with corruption and guilty of massive misallocations of funds in almost every area, fails this simple but crucial test.” (358 – 359)

“One of the sharpest observations made by Karel van Wolferen is that the Japanese bureaucratic system has never relied on public approval for its legitimacy and power; it works in a separate dimension.” (361)

“The best word to describe Japan’s modern plight is *Choto Hampa*, which means ‘neither this nor that’ –in other words, mediocrity.” (371)

“Kawase’s [lower master] comment was a profound one, for lack of *jitsu* [reality] carries over into every field in Japan today, and can be said to be at the very root of the country’s present cultural malaise. The construction frenzy [building without purpose], architecture [design without context], education [facts without independent thought], new cities [destroying the old], the stock market [paying no dividends], real estate [making

no returns], universities [irrelevant to education], internationalization [keeping out the world], bureaucracy [spending without regard to real needs], finance ['virtual yen'], cinema [aimed mostly at children, not at adults], company balance sheets ['cosmetic accounting'], the Environment Agency [unconcerned with the environment], medicine [copycat drugs improperly tested], information [fuzzy facts, secrets, and lies], airports [bad for people, good for radishes] - the whole edifice is lacking in *jitsu*." (383)
'Enduring the unendurable' is a quote from Hirohito's mouth; August 15th, 1945.