



# Learning Japanese History in English

There are mainly two ways to learn about a country history: the hard way, which is the one we all went through when studying at school, and which consists of reading specialized books, in other words, learning history through history. It can be pretty exhausting when you have other things to do aside, or just are not motivated enough to remember everything by reading and reading again hundreds of pages. The other way, which is the one I will mainly be discussing about here, consists of learning history through fictions.

Welcome to the easy way.

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# I/ Introduction to Japanese history

The first thing you must know before getting into the study of Japanese history is that it is very dense, and a very turbulent one. You have all heard of French Revolution, and how it completely changed the whole country in 1789. Just imagine that Japan had 5 or 6 “French Revolutions” until now. Japanese history has a lot of eras, most of them lasting for a few centuries, and a lot of them ending in a semi-revolution. For this reason, you need to understand that when learning about Japanese history, you will be learning about several different Japan. To have a better understanding, I strongly advise you to have with you a book that cover the whole Japanese history, and every time you find an interest in some era, you can then start to focus more on it, by reading fictions and other easy to read books.

I advise you to check on amazon if there is a book that suits you more, but here are two examples of famous books you can use as introduction. You can find more details about references at the end of this guide.

Examples:

*-Japan: The Story of a Nation* by Edwin O. Reischauer

*-History of Japan: Revised Edition* by Richard Mason and John Caiger

## II/ Stop on every topic you like

Whenever you find a topic that seems interesting during your reading of the whole Japanese history, I advise you to stop there and find a novel, a manga or anything easy to read about said topic.

The main reason is that novels are made so that their stories are easy to visualize, and the more you visualize, the more you will remember about that part of Japanese history.

To give you an idea of how I studied Japanese history:

1. I read *“Japan: The Story of a Nation”* by Edwin O. Reischauer up to the Heian era.
2. I found the wars at the end of the Heian era to be very interesting, so I read *“Heike Monogatari”*, an epic account of the wars between the Minamoto family and the Taira family.
3. Returned to *“Japan: The Story of a Nation”* up to the end of the Kamakura era.
4. Fell in love with the Sengoku era, and so started to read novels written by Shiba Ryôtarô about Nobunaga, Hideyoshi and Ieyasu. I was so interested that I also read some books written only about that era.
5. Returned to *“Japan: The story of a Nation”* up to the end of the Edo era (Bakumatsu).
6. Fell in love with the Bakumatsu period, and then started to read among others *“Oi Ryôma”*, a manga about Sakamoto Ryôma, one of the most famous samurai of Japan, who played a major role during the Bakumatsu, leading to the Meiji Restoration.

7. Returned to “Japan: The story of a Nation” up to modern history.

So to sum-up, first, find yourself an easy to read book about Japanese history as a whole, and stop every time you find something interesting.

Sharing exhaustive references here wouldn't be practicable, but you can find some references I personally recommend at the end of this guide.

### III/ Read specialized books

When you are done reading the whole book about Japanese history, it is time to get serious and challenge yourself by reading specialized books. You can either read a book on a specific era, or read a series that is extremely detailed. All of this is of course not needed if you just wish to get a global understanding of Japanese history, so there is no need to force yourself. This will however be necessary if you wish to have a real understanding of how deep Japanese history is. Here are a few books that would prove useful if you wish to know everything you can about Japan, as well as some books I would personally recommend if you want to know more about a specific period or event.

-*The Cambridge History of Japan*: very dense series, from ancient to modern Japan.

-*Sengoku Jidai*: all you need to know about the Sengoku era, and more specifically about Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu.

-*Hagakure*: One of the first books which dealt with the concept of Bushidô.

## IV/ Books references

### 1/ Overall introduction to Japanese history:

#### a/ From Wakayama University Library:

-英語で読む日本史 *Japanese history : 11 experts reflect on the past*

Reference (書誌) ID : 1000209094 - 2F・Open Shelf Books - Call No. : 210.1||Ko

#### b/ Books not available at Wakayama University:

-*Japan: The Story of a Nation* by Edwin O. Reischauer:

<https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB12315225>

-*History of Japan: Revised Edition* by Richard Mason and John Caiger:

<https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA37719431>

### 2/ Novels and manga about Japanese history:

#### a/ From Wakayama University Library:

-学習まんが日本の歴史, by Ôki Tetsuo. (manga series about Japanese history. Only in Japanese)

Reference (書誌) ID : 1000461918 - 2F・Open Shelf Books - Call No. : 210.1||G||1~20

-英語で読む平家物語 *The tale of the Heike*,

Reference (書誌) ID : 1000401893 - 2F・Open Shelf Books - Call No. : 837.7||WB||1~2

#### b/ From other sources:

-*RYÔMA!: The Life of Sakamoto Ryôma: Japanese Swordsman and Visionary*, by Shiba Ryôtarô (English version on kindle). (novel about Sakamoto Ryôma, a Japanese legend from the Bakumatsu period)

<https://www.amazon.co.jp/dp/B07CLH6693/>

-*The Tale of the Heike*, translated by Royall Tyler. (Story of the war opposing the Minamoto clan to the Taira clan, at the end of the Heian era)

<https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB15293446>

### 3/ Specialized books:

#### a/ From Wakayama University Library:

- *The Cambridge History of Japan*, by John Whitney Hall, Marius B. Jansen, Madoka Kanai, Denis Twitchett.

Reference (書誌) ID : 1000351434 - 2F · Open Shelf Books - Call No. : 210||C||1~5

- *Hagakure : the secret wisdom of the samurai* by Yamamoto Tsunetomo ; translated by Alexander Bennett.

Reference (書誌) ID : 1000461235 - 2F · Open Shelf Books - Call No. : 156||YT

#### b/ From other sources:

- *Sengoku Jidai : Nobunaga, Hideyoshi, and Ieyasu:three unifiers of Japan*, by Danny Chaplin.

<https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB2883455X>

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