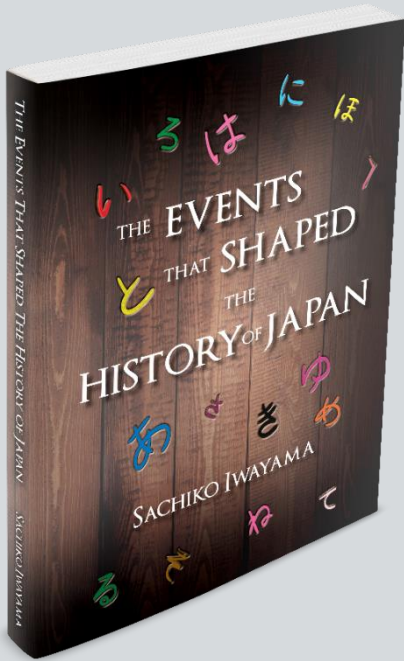


The Events that Shaped the History of Japan

Sachiko Iwayama



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Author name: **Sachiko Iwayama**

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Author Sachiko Iwayama spent thirty years writing her debut book *The Events that Shaped the History of Japan*. She undertook years upon years of research, in order to condense Japan's history into one engaging account. Have you ever wondered where the Japanese tea ceremony came from? Or what the name of Japan's first queen was?

We caught up with Sachiko recently, to discuss just some of these questions, and find out a little more about her story.

InHouse Publishing: *The Events that Shaped the History of Japan*. That's a big subject – what made you decide to tackle it in a book?

Sachiko Iwayama: I came to Australia about 50 years ago. From time to time I heard Australians make comments like, 'In Japan, women don't have a say. Wives listen to their husbands and follow their instructions. That's the tradition.' Or, 'Japan was a *samurai* country from the beginning. That's why the people are combative.' I thought they were misguided, but I couldn't correct their views as I had little knowledge of Japan's history.

About 30 years ago, I arrived at a stage of my life where I could afford to spend time reading and thinking. I decided to find out more about Japan and life there in the past. I visited Japan every year, travelled widely, and bought relevant books, which I shipped back to Australia. As I studied and became fascinated with the unfolding of events that changed the course of history, I wanted to share, with English-speaking people, the captivating story of Japanese people. I began writing what I hoped would become a compact and easy-to-read book on Japanese history and culture.



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IHP: Were you curious about your cultural history as a child? How has this developed throughout your life?

Sachiko: Both my mother and my grandmother were instructors of the tea ceremony, and they conducted classes at home. Although I was not a student of theirs, the tea ceremony was a part of our everyday life. A tea ceremony involves not only tea and tea bowls, but encompasses a wide range of things from everyday life, such as food and its preparation, flowers and containers, charcoals and urns, gardens and poems. So, I can say I was familiar with cultural tradition without much realising it. Appreciation of 'the moment' was around us. Flowers that lasted only a short time were enjoyed, and the foods of the season were sought and eaten.

IHP: What was your research and writing process like?

Sachiko: Exciting. To find out about one particular subject, I always sought different views on it from multiple books, and it was exciting and satisfying to build a picture I was happy with. I ended up accumulating almost 800 books on Japan in my study. I was pleased to learn that Japanese women traditionally had big, important roles to play and enjoyed a respectable status. They lost that tradition only in the 19th–20th centuries, when Japan focussed all its attention on modernising itself to become a strong nation, comparable to Western countries.

What I tried to do was to digest what I read in books written by historians and experts in various fields, and write in a way that would make history interesting to general readers – by that I mean non-historians, like myself. The manuscript went through many, many rewrites so that it would be readable and engaging, and not bogged down in details.

IHP: How long did it take you to write this book, and did you know from the beginning you would choose to publish your manuscript?

Sachiko: It took me 30 years. I knew I would have to get it published so that people could share what I found interesting.

IHP: What is your favourite story or piece of history in *The Events that Shaped the History of Japan*?

Sachiko: There was a remarkable man called Hideyoshi. He was born the son of a farmer/occasional soldier at the time the civil war situation of almost 100 years was approaching its end in the late 16th century. He found employment at a *bushi* (warrior) lord's household as a servant/soldier. He was small in stature, but was a quick thinker and very capable, and worked his way up to become one of the lord's trusted lieutenants. The lord's ambition was to unite the country under his rule.

Following the untimely death of his lord, Hideyoshi inherited his late lord's ambition, and went on to accomplish the task of bringing the whole of Japan under one rule. He was a shrewd strategist and had a complex vision. He also had an amiable personality.



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Here is an excerpt from my book, which portrays Hideyoshi in his private life:

Hideyoshi and Nei, whom Hideyoshi married when he was still a lowly soldier, were very close. They talked not only about private matters but also those of a public nature, and with their loud farmers' voices and Owari province accents, they often sounded as if they were quarrelling. If some vassals evoked a wrath in Hideyoshi, it was quite often through Nei that their apologies were heard. There is a letter from Hideyoshi to Nei accepting her pleas to soften the measures of tax collection in a territory that had recently become his. Hideyoshi gave Nei a fief, which brought her substantial independent income. They exchanged letters frequently, and one of those he wrote towards the end of the Kyushu campaign read, 'I hope to be back in Osaka around the tenth of July. This war has made me older. Many white hairs have come out, and I can't pull them all out. When I think of seeing you soon, I feel embarrassed. I know I shouldn't feel that way, not in your company, but these white hairs are a nuisance.'

IHP: Who should read *The Events that Shaped the History of Japan*?

Sachiko: English-speaking people with an interest in or curiosity about Japan, and Japanese people who are in a similar situation to what I was 40–50 years ago, of not knowing much about Japan and its history. By reading *The Events that Shaped the History of Japan*, they can acquire enough knowledge to respond to most general queries. This will save them 30 years and 800 books!

IHP: What's your all-time favourite thing about Japan, past or present?

Sachiko: Historically, Japanese people had many gods around them. Trees, rocks, mountains, hills, rivers, rice, rice paddies, kitchen stoves, wells, plots of land – all housed their gods, who would look after the welfare of the people if properly revered. When Buddhism was introduced, the Japanese people, instead of challenging the foreign religion or converting to it by abandoning the old, added Buddha to the numerous gods they already had. So now, when we desperately need divine intervention, we say, 'Please, eight million gods and Buddha, help me!'

This Japanese characteristic of finding a way to accept a new situation and changing it to suit their way of life, I think, is remarkable. Look at the way the Japanese developed the simple-line alphabets of *katakana* and *hiragana* from complicated forms of Chinese writing.

IHP: What is the ultimate goal for *The Events that Shaped the History of Japan*?

Sachiko: I have found that knowing a little bit of history makes travelling in Japan a lot more interesting. I hope *The Events that Shaped the History of Japan* will contribute towards an enjoyable visit to Japan, for every reader.



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