My first exposure to Japanese history came during the late 1970s, when I was an undergraduate at the University of Oregon. At that time, Japanese manufactured products were beginning to make rapid inroads into American markets, and the country’s economic importance was widely acknowledged both by opinion leaders and by members of the general public. And yet few people, in America at least, had a good understanding of contemporary Japanese society, far less of Japanese history (with the possible exception of the events immediately surrounding World War II, which remained fresh in the minds of some Americans).

This state of affairs was reflected in the popular and academic literature on Japan—that is to say, there were not a lot of books to read. Fortunately, the few textbooks by knowledgeable authors presented a view that was relatively consistent and easy to understand. To paraphrase their basic message, the Japanese people were homogeneous and group-oriented, and they had a unique language and culture. The emphasis on the group resulted from the historical importance of wet-rice cultivation, which was labor-intensive and demanded the cooperation of all village members. The other distinctive features of Japanese society, meanwhile, stemmed from the country’s geographic isolation from the rest of the world—so the story went.

These views are evident, for example, in the work of Edwin Reischauer, a “missionary kid” born and raised in prewar Tokyo, who after the war went on to become a leading American historian and
also, during the early 1960s, U.S. ambassador to Japan.³ Reischauer’s first major scholarly work, a translation and study of the diary of a ninth-century Japanese pilgrim to China, emphasized the importance of foreign relations and intercultural contacts in early Japanese history.⁴ Somewhat ironically, however, the many survey histories and popular works published by Reischauer in later years all stressed the overriding historical importance of geographic isolation.

In one of his last books, published originally in 1980, Reischauer wrote, “The Japanese, like all other peoples, have been shaped in large part by the land in which they live. Its location, climate, and natural endowments are unchangeable facts that have set limits to their development and helped give it specific direction.”⁵ The most important geographic fact about the country, he wrote, was that “[t]hroughout most of its history Japan has been perhaps the most isolated of all the major countries of the world.”⁶ This isolation had several important consequences, in Reischauer’s opinion. For example, it “has made other people, even the nearby Koreans and Chinese, look on the Japanese as being somehow different and has produced in the Japanese a strong sense of self-identity and also an almost painful self-consciousness in the presence of others.” Isolation had also resulted in “Japan’s unusual degree of cultural homogeneity.”⁷ According to Reischauer, “the Japanese today are the most thoroughly unified and culturally homogeneous large bloc of people in the world, with the possible exception of the North Chinese.”⁸

Many years have passed since those lines were written, and Japan if anything occupies an even more visible place in the world than it did in 1980. There has been a flood of writings on Japan and the Japanese in English and other languages, and many Americans, at least, have an easy familiarity with at least some aspects of Japanese culture—not only automobiles and electronic gadgets but now also karaoke and anime. It is striking, therefore, to note that Reischauer’s historical vision of Japan remains largely intact, at least at the textbook level.

To take but one example, a well-received text published by W. G. Beasley in 1999 begins with the following statement:

The history of Japan . . . has a high degree of continuity from ancient times to the twentieth century. The Japanese have always occupied part or all of the same territory, its borders defined by the sea. They have
spoken and written a common language, once it had taken firm shape in about the tenth century. Their population has been largely homogen-ous, little touched by immigration except in very early periods. Awareness of this has given them a sense of being racially distinct. “We Japanese”, ware-ware Nihonjin, is a phrase that constantly recurs.9

Beasley goes on to argue that the Japanese islands were far enough from the Asian mainland to prevent foreign invasions but close enough to allow much cultural borrowing: “The sea was less of a barrier to foreign culture than to foreign armies. From the seventh century onwards, if not earlier, the religion and philosophy, the art and literature, the economic skills and governmental institutions of China found their way to Japan, at first via Korea and the Tsushima Straits, then more directly across the East China Sea.”10 But while acknowledging the importance of cultural borrowing, Beasley is clear that Japan has a distinctive culture and society that developed as a result of the country’s geographic isolation.

Why have these ideas enjoyed such tremendous staying power? One reason, of course, is that they contain important seeds of truth. However, another reason is that many English-language works on Japan are less “views from outside” than they are repackaged versions of Japanese views. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, most Japanese people—scholars and members of the general public alike—saw their country as a kind of primeval nation-state whose natural borders had historically protected it from the outside world. This view of the past probably reflected a general need to retain national pride and cultural identity following the traumatic events of the midcentury, when Japanese military expansion in Asia was followed by defeat and occupation by the United States. In part, this view of the past was also actively promoted by the Japanese government through the school system for the purpose of creating a homogenous, unified labor force that could be mobilized in the name of economic growth.11 Many foreign scholars seem to have absorbed this “worldview” from their Japanese colleagues and acquaintances, later disseminating it to the English-speaking world in the form of textbooks and other publications on Japan.

But times are changing, and a new view of history—and of geography—has begun to emerge among some Japanese scholars and even members of the public at large. The person most responsible for
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these changes is Amino Yoshihiko, a medievalist who has authored or edited more than one hundred books since the late 1970s. Amino’s books are enormously popular in Japan, sometimes selling upwards of one hundred thousand copies.

Although it is difficult to summarize his work in a few sentences, Amino offers a view of a socially and regionally diverse Japan. In addition to farmers, nobles, warriors, and monks—the main actors in most traditional histories—he calls attention to the lives of fishermen, traders, entertainers, gamblers, prostitutes, pirates, and social outcasts. Amino’s Japan consists of a dizzying variety of local traditions as well as a rich and vibrant tradition of movement and communication—not just within the Japanese archipelago but also between it and the outside world. The sea, to Amino, is not a barrier but a connecting force.12

Outside Japan, a small minority of scholars has always emphasized diversity and fragmentation, but this view now seems to be coming to the fore. Symbolic of this trend is the 1996 publication of Multicultural Japan: Paleolithic to Postmodern, a collection of essays by mostly Australian scholars. This book, according to one of the editors, “challenges the conventional approach by arguing that Japan has long been ‘multicultural’, and that what is distinctive is the success with which that diversity has been cloaked by the ideology of ‘uniqueness’ and ‘monoculturalism.’”13 Specifically, the editor writes, “[w]hile the monolithic and homogeneous myths of the past served the interest of elites intent on preserving order and control, helping to legitimize established authority, the common people preserved rich and diverse counter-traditions, which were open, bridged social and class distinctions, and had little time for the pretensions of their rulers.”14

This view of premodern Japan is in many ways the complete opposite of the old “commonsense” picture still enshrined in many of our English-language textbooks. Instead of homogeneity, we have diversity; instead of isolation, we have open and wide-ranging communication and exchange. Although I would not pretend to speak for Amino himself, the eagerness with which his vision has been embraced by other scholars and members of the Japanese public suggests an important change in attitudes during the past several decades. Evidently, people in Japan want to believe in a golden, medieval age of freedom and diversity—either because they are frustrated with their own strait-
laced lives, or just as likely, because their lives are changing as Japan, and the world, enters the “postmodern” age. Society, even in Japan, is more fragmented and diverse than before, while at the same time social boundaries are becoming more fluid, and the forces of globalization and the borderless world economy are becoming impossible to ignore.

The change in viewpoint from the orthodoxy represented by Reischauer to the postmodern vision offered by Amino might be seen as a classic “paradigm shift,” in which a host of factors have converged to cause researchers (and members of the reading public) to abandon one worldview in favor of another more in line with their current values and assumptions. But just because people are changing their minds does not mean that they are right.

Which, then, of these views is closer to the truth? Oddly, no systematic attempt has been made to address this question. One reason is that most practicing historians of Japan, unlike Reischauer and Amino, limit themselves to discussing a single period or, in some cases, just a single locality. And although they usually take care to draw appropriate comparisons across time and space and to place their work in proper historiographical context, the end result often remains fairly narrow.

A vast and growing literature in both Japanese and English, for example, is devoted to showing that Japan was not, in fact, a “closed country” in the early modern, or Edo, period (1600–1867). This literature is a needed corrective to earlier views, but there has been a tendency to lose sight of the forest for the trees: a good case could be made, in my opinion, that Edo Japan was a relatively closed country by comparison with earlier or later periods of Japanese history. What is lacking here is the “big picture”—early modern foreign relations is seen as a topic unto itself, not as part of the larger flow of Japanese—or of world—history.

Similarly, recent years have seen a vigorous debate about whether Edo Japan was politically or culturally unified, or whether it was fragmented along regional and/or class lines. But the answers to these questions also depend fundamentally upon one’s point of reference: Edo society was highly fragmented in comparison with any modern nation-state, but by comparison with other periods in Japanese history (or with premodern societies in many other parts of the world),
it appears remarkably integrated and cohesive. A full view of the significance of this period becomes possible only if we are prepared to look backward (and sideways) as well as forward.

Another problem is that little effort has gone into defining the terms of the debate. As noted above, the tradition represented by Reischauer and Beasley simply assumes that “Japan” is and always has been a meaningful unit of analysis—a predefined social and political community occupying a fixed, geographically determined territory. Amino comes off somewhat better in this regard when he argues, for example, that the very name “Japan” (Nihon) dates from the late seventh century and that before this date there was no concept of a unified country or society. And yet in all of his work, Amino plays fast and loose with other terms and concepts. To take but one example, his 1982 book, *Higashi to nishi ga kataru Nihon no rekishi* (Japan’s history as told by east and west), argues that eastern Japan and western Japan were virtually separate “countries” (kuni) in premodern times, but what this term means is nowhere made clear. Are we talking about different states? Cultures? Ethnic groups? These would seem to be important distinctions, and yet Amino glosses over them without comment. Other authors, of course, are more careful with terms, but because there is little standardization in usage scholars talk past each other, and it is difficult to get a sense of the big picture.

The present work is, I believe, the first real attempt to weigh the pros and cons of these two opposing visions of Japanese history. Like Reischauer and Amino, but unlike many other historians, I am interested in the “big questions,” specifically: What is “Japan”? When did it come to be? How did it change over time? And how does it fit into the larger world? In trying to answer these questions, I have made an explicit attempt to avoid some of the pitfalls evident in previous work. The result, I believe, is a new synthesis on Japanese history, one that is at once broader, more theoretically rigorous, and more explicitly comparative than other available works on the subject.

Introducing a study of Japanese-Ainu relations, Tessa Morris-Suzuki once noted that “[t]he shape of things becomes clearer when one looks at the edge than when one looks at the center.” I likewise believe that we can best discover what “Japan” is by simultaneously asking what it is not and by examining the nature of the border(s) between the “Japan” and “not-Japan.” Accordingly, the focus of this
study is on Japan’s historical frontiers and boundaries—not just the seas and coastlines emphasized by Reischauer and Amino but also the various land frontiers that formerly existed within the archipelago. (For definitions of these various terms, please turn to the end of this chapter.)

The academic and popular literature on frontiers and boundaries is vast, and it is proliferating daily. Probably one reason for this, paradoxically, is the current trend toward globalization, which brings people of different backgrounds and cultures into closer contact than ever before, forcing them to confront their identities and to think more deeply about the significance of borders and border crossings. Based on my own reading, most recent historical research on frontiers and boundaries exhibits one or more of the following interrelated characteristics:

1. There is a tendency to emphasize the complex or multifaceted nature of borders. Whereas researchers in the past were often content to focus on geopolitical aspects, and in some cases on cultural ones, they now increasingly recognize that these facets of border life cannot be divorced from other considerations, particularly what might be called the three Es: economy, ethnicity, and ecology.

2. Just as disciplinary boundaries have fallen, so have temporal ones—with the result that many recent studies today cover centuries, not decades, and emphasize continuities, not disjunctures.

3. There is a growing tendency to view the border from both sides. Whereas it was formerly commonplace to talk of the expansion of frontiers into “virgin territory,” now the emphasis is on interaction, two-way influence, and accommodation between (or among) adjacent polities, cultures, and societies. Frontier history has become decentered, featuring multiple, subjective points of view.

4. There has been an increasing focus on ambiguity—both upon the fuzzy, ragged nature of the frontier itself and upon the multivalent, situational identities embraced by its inhabitants. Borders are not clear-cut lines between “us” and “them”; rather, they are zones where “we” are gradually transformed into “them,” and vice versa, areas where assumed and ascribed identities depend upon circumstance and contingency, not upon blood or geography.
5. There is a tendency to portray frontiers as places rather than processes. While denizens of the frontier continue to occupy the historical foreground, researchers also take care to examine the land and the natural environment, which influence, and are influenced by, frontier society.

6. Borderlands are now frequently studied for their own sake, not for what they tell us about the nature of the larger polities or societies they circumscribe. The result has been a groundswell of “bottoms-up,” “on-the-ground” frontier histories, offering a strong contrast to the “top-down,” “statist” histories they replace.

7. There is now a distinct aversion toward “grand theorizing.” Case studies abound, but little attempt is made to draw broad conclusions or posit hypotheses that can be tested against other situations.

These seven trends are evident in all subfields of frontier history—even the oldest and most conservative, Roman studies. But they reach their greatest development in what has been called the New Western History, that corpus of research devoted to refuting old views of the American West—and most especially those articulated a century ago by the most famous of all frontier historians, Frederick Jackson Turner.

Two of the most important New Western Historians are Patricia Nelson Limerick and Richard White. Limerick is perhaps best known for her 1987 book, *The Legacy of Conquest*, which effectively stood Turner on his head. Where Turner saw a predestined American expansion into virtually uninhabited territory, Nelson saw a multisided encounter involving, among others, white Americans, American Indians, blacks, Mexicans, and Chinese and Japanese immigrants. Where Turner saw a fixed process of development through discrete economic phases, Limerick saw a region unified by its geography. Where Turner saw an “end to the frontier” in the 1890s, Limerick saw continuities lasting until the present. And where Turner spoke in terms of generalities, Limerick recorded the voices of specific historical actors—without prejudice based on race, ethnicity, religion, cultural background, or gender. Limerick’s critique of the “Turner thesis” is perhaps symbolized most clearly by her rejection of the very
term “frontier,” on grounds of its alleged ethnocentric, exclusivist connotations.\textsuperscript{28}

A similar perspective is offered by Richard White, author of the acclaimed 1991 book \textit{The Middle Ground}.\textsuperscript{29} In this work, White describes how native Americans and Europeans created new systems of meaning and exchange in North America during the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. The “middle ground” of the title refers to “the place in between: in between cultures, peoples, and in between empires and the non-state world of villages,” White writes. “It is a place where many of the North American subjects and allies of empires lived. It is the area between the historical foreground of European invasion and occupation and the background of Indian defeat and retreat.”\textsuperscript{30} Ultimately, the “middle ground” was a place of accommodation, where different peoples had to adjust to each other because no one group was able to establish a monopoly on power.

These general trends have recently begun to make their mark in the field of Japanese history. Paradoxically, although the changing image of Japan’s past as a whole seems to be largely internally generated (with, of course, a few important exceptions), the new view of Japanese frontiers emanates at least in part from abroad. One reason for the prominent role that foreign scholars play in this area is a difference in perspective—Japanese people looking around themselves see the internal workings of society, while foreigners looking in come face-to-face with borders before they see anything else. However, it is also true that frontier studies in Japan have been held back by the fact that many (probably most) Japanese historians do not read English or other foreign languages and are thus unfamiliar with the research trends described above.

There is, of course, a huge corpus of specialized Japanese works on borders, peripheries, and foreign relations. Much of it is written from the perspective of institutional history, but some authors do touch upon themes similar to those discussed above. One thinks, for instance, of Murai Shōsuke’s many publications on trade, commerce, and piracy along Japan’s western maritime frontier during the medieval period (roughly the twelfth through sixteenth centuries).\textsuperscript{31} Another good example, though from a very different genre, is Oguma Eiji’s massive “Nihonjin” no kyōkai (Boundaries of the “Japanese”), a
study of changing Japanese perceptions of Self and Other as reflected in nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonial policy. I will be referring to these and many other Japanese-language studies in later chapters, but for now let us turn to some of the recent contributions to this field by foreign scholars.

In English-language scholarship alone, the past decade has seen exciting new publications by David Howell, Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Richard Siddle, Brett Walker, Ronald Toby, Gregory Smits, Mimi Yiengpruksawan, and Mark Hudson. Of these authors, the first five have concentrated on historical developments of the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries; the last two are concerned with far earlier times.

Howell, Morris-Suzuki, Siddle, and Walker have all chosen to study the Ainu, the indigenous residents of Japan’s northern island, Hokkaido. At the risk of brutal simplification, Howell’s work focuses on Ainu ethnicity, on the one hand, and the spread of capitalist labor relations in Hokkaido, on the other. Morris-Suzuki is concerned largely with the construction of Japanese and Ainu identities in the frontier zone. Siddle’s research is on the assimilation of the Ainu as an ethnic minority within the Japanese nation-state. And Walker has studied Japan’s “conquest” of Ainu lands from a cultural and ecological perspective.

Toby and Smits, meanwhile, have produced important studies of another kind of boundary—that between Japan and overseas countries. Toby, the author of a pathbreaking 1984 study discrediting the sakoku (“closed country”) thesis, has since turned his attention to how Japanese notions of the world were irrevocably altered by the country’s sixteenth-century encounter with the West. Smits’ research is not on Japan per se but on the Ryukyu kingdom, its neighbor to the south. Smits shows how Ryukyuan elites of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries managed to construct a distinct cultural and political identity without being overwhelmed by Japan, on the one hand, or China, on the other.

Art historian Mimi Yiengpruksawan and archaeologist Mark Hudson have gone much further back in time than any of the other authors. Yiengpruksawan has written a vivid portrait of the hybrid culture of Hiraizumi, a border town in northeastern Honshu (Japan’s “main island”) during the twelfth century. Hudson, meanwhile, has
produced a broad-ranging, theoretical study of ethnogenesis in the Japan islands. Among other things, this contains a detailed analysis of the origins of the Ainu people.43

Many of these studies fit squarely within the emerging mainstream of contemporary border studies as outlined above. This is most clearly seen, perhaps, in the work of Tessa Morris-Suzuki and Brett Walker. Morris-Suzuki’s historical analysis of Japanese-Ainu relations, and more generally her work on identity, owes an obvious debt to postmodernism. Walker, meanwhile, explicitly (and successfully) models his approach on the New Western History of Limerick and White.44

The present study both builds upon the results of these earlier works and departs from them in significant ways. The main differences are of approach. First, unlike many of the authors mentioned above, I am interested in borders not so much for their own sake but for what they tell us about Japan. Borderlands and frontiers are fascinating in their own right, but readers interested in learning about the lives of individual frontier residents, for example, will be disappointed because that is not the subject of this book. This study is unapologetically centered in Japan, not in the frontier zone per se. My interest in the latter is a means to an end, not the end itself.

Second, I do not think of borders or frontiers as geographic places but as social margins or interfaces. To be sure, these may be located in particular places at particular times, but they are not necessarily tied to the land—or, in Japan’s case, to the coastlines or the seas. To say otherwise is to accept that Japan’s boundaries are geographically determined, a position that I reject entirely. The boundaries of Japan, like those of other societies, are social and political creations,45 and they do not necessarily coincide with the coastlines of the main islands. At times in history “Japan” has been considerably smaller than the Japanese archipelago; and at other times (most notably in the mid-twentieth century) it has been substantially larger.

Third, this study does not eschew theory. As noted above, I want to ask big questions, and answering them sometimes requires heavy ammunition. For this reason the book is explicitly theoretical. A concept like the “middle ground” is evocative and useful in understanding the experience of borderland peoples and societies, but it does not go very far toward explaining larger social trends—unless, of course,
one cares to argue with Frederick Jackson Turner that the frontier experience can be, and has been, paramount in shaping entire nations.

To answer questions such as “What is Japan?” and “How does it fit within the larger world?” we need more powerful theories—and I have made use of a number, drawn eclectically from fields such as geography, political science, anthropology, sociology, and linguistics. Some of these, such as world-systems theory, are on the cutting edge of social science research. Others, such as my references to “culture areas” and “stages” of ethnic development, may strike some readers as old-fashioned. This is not the place to debate the merits and demerits of each theory I invoke—these are discussed more fully in the text itself. Here I will merely note that I have read fairly widely in each of the fields mentioned, and I have made an effort to recruit those theories that seem best adapted to explaining the Japanese case—both separately and in tandem. There is no point, for example, in describing the development of the Japanese polity in terms that are contradicted by later explanations regarding cultural patterns or ethno genesis. If the pieces don’t fit, our puzzle of Japan is still on the floor in a mess.

Now for some similarities. As will already be clear, I view borders, and more generally human societies, as complex phenomena that cannot be understood without breaking down some traditional academic boundaries. So the study is interdisciplinary—although because of its emphasis on theory, it is certainly not “undisciplined.” And like most other recent studies of borders, I make an effort to acknowledge and engage various points of view: not only those of contemporaries living on opposite sides of the border but also the differing ways in which contemporaries and modern observers have construed the same reality.

I am in philosophical agreement with most of the other trends as well—but at least some of them, I believe, involve empirical questions whose answers should be derived, not assumed. Regarding the question of temporal continuity, Patricia Nelson Limerick is certainly correct to argue that the history of the American West is one of enduring legacies. But we should not automatically assume that all historical processes are continuous. Nor should we assume the opposite. It is common in the social sciences, for example, to see a fundamental
difference between the modern world and conditions in premodern times. The discourse of disjuncture is invoked every time we contrast the modern nation-state with more “primitive” forms of political organization, assert the qualitative difference between the capitalist world economy and earlier modes of production, or postulate an “epistemological break” signaling the emergence of modern modes of thought. Similar ideas have frequently carried over into the literature on frontiers and boundaries, with many writers asserting that early peoples had only vague ideas of territoriality and that political borders such as we understand them today did not exist before the modern nation-state. Perhaps this is correct, but we should not take it as a given—it is an empirical question that can, and should, be addressed by looking at actual case studies. What continuities, and what discontinuities, can we identify across time, and how can we explain them?

A similar point can be made with respect to the spatial or social characteristics of borders. Borders are places where things change, but how abrupt is the transition? As noted above, it is common today to emphasize social continuity within and across frontiers. No doubt such continuity exists, or has existed, in most cases, but again this should be treated as a hypothesis, not an assumed truth. It is at least possible that some social transitions are more abrupt than we give them credit for. Again, a look at the specifics will yield the correct answers.

Finally, there is the matter of cross-border interaction. While most authors today prefer to emphasize sustained, intense interaction and mutual, reciprocal exchange across borders, wishing for these things does not necessarily make them so (at least, when discussing past events). Is it not more likely that the volume and nature of interaction and the prevailing direction of influence should vary according to location and historical circumstance? If so, then this variation, and the reasons for it, become important subjects for investigation. One reader of an earlier version of this work took offense at my discussion of the reasons behind Japanese expansion into Hokkaido, which he read as an apology for Japanese-style “manifest destiny.” Nothing could be further from my intentions: Japan’s conquest of Ainu territory is just as reprehensible as, for example, U.S. expansion into na-
tive lands in the American West. To deny the reality of the conquest or to avoid seeking the reasons for it is to shirk our responsibility as historians.

These themes and others will be pursued in greater detail in the remainder of the book, which consists of ten chapters arranged in three parts. Part I, “Borders,” attempts to define what “Japan” is, by examining and comparing different types of social borders: political (Chapter 1), biological and cultural (Chapter 2), and ethnic (Chapter 3). In Part II, “Interactions,” I try to evaluate the significance of these boundaries by using a version of world-systems theory (described in Chapter 4). Specifically, I examine four different categories of cross-border traffic—political/military interactions (Chapter 5) and flows of bulk goods (Chapter 6), prestige goods (Chapter 7), and information (Chapter 8)—in order to establish whether Japan’s borders have historically functioned as barriers or as conduits of exchange (Chapter 9). Finally, in Part III, “Dynamics,” I attempt to provide a general explanation for shifts in the location and nature of Japanese borders on the basis of long-standing (but not predestined) imbalances in “social power,” both within the archipelago, and between the archipelago and neighboring regions on the Asian continent (Chapter 10).

Style, Conventions, and Definitions

This book, then, represents an attempt to organize the facts of Japanese history within the framework of social theory. One reader of a draft version panned it on these grounds, arguing, in effect, that I had no new facts to interest historians of Japan and no new ideas to interest theoreticians. This may be true, but it misses the point. Historians of Japan don’t just need new facts; they also need new ways to organize and think about them. And while theoreticians may need new ideas, they also need specific case studies to test their arguments against. The needs of both groups, I hope, are met by the present study.

Nor is the book intended only for specialists. Most important ideas in the humanities and social sciences, I believe, can be explained in ordinary English without resort to formulas or jargon. As Patricia Nelson Limerick has noted, however, much academic writing is will-
fully obfuscatory. Essentially, it says to the reader, “If you can’t under-
tstand this, it’s your fault for not being smart enough.”46 My opin-
ion is that if something is not clear, it is probably the fault of the au-
thor. In this book, therefore, I make an effort to explain things in
simple language—not just “wherever possible” but consistently,
throughout the book. In many places I could have avoided taking sides
on a particular issue by resorting to academic jargon. I have not done
so, because I think it is intellectually dishonest. My frequent use of
the first person also reflects the same policy; if something is my opin-
ion, I think I owe it to the reader to say so, rather than trying to cre-
ate a misleading impression of objectivity where none exists. All of
this goes to say that I have tried to make the book accessible not just
to fellow academics but also to other readers with a general interest
in the subject matter.

For all of these reasons, no extensive knowledge of Japanese his-
tory or of social theory is assumed on the part of the reader; relevant
facts and concepts are introduced as needed, generally when they first
appear. Nor is the reader expected to be particularly familiar with the
geography of Japan (or, more broadly, East Asia). On the theory that
“a picture is worth a thousand words,” I have attempted to include as
many maps as possible, both to identify the places mentioned in the
text and to convey my ideas in visual form.

Because this book is about Japan, it contains a large number of
Japanese names and terms. All Japanese words in the text are ro-
manized according to the standard, modified Hepburn system. (The
few Korean and Chinese terms are given, respectively, in McCune-
Reischauer and Pinyin transcription.) Japanese, like all languages,
has changed over time, but for purposes of simplicity I use the mod-
ern pronunciation or form of all words. Consonants in modern Japa-
nese are generally pronounced as a native English speaker would
guess, except for g, which is always hard, and r, which sounds like a
cross between an English r and l. Vowels are pronounced as in Ital-
ian. Long or double vowels are indicated with a macron (e.g., Jōmon),
except in the case of place-names that will already be familiar to most
readers (e.g., Tokyo, Osaka). Personal names are given in the Japa-
nese order, that is, with the surname preceding the given name.

Finally, let me briefly define three important terms that I have
already used repeatedly: “border,” “boundary,” and “frontier.” As
noted, some practitioners of the New Western History have rejected use of the word “frontier” because of its supposedly statist connotations. David Howell and Brett Walker have also expressed similar reservations about use of the term with reference to the former Ainu territories in Hokkaido. I respect the views of these authors, but I think it is a case of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. The concept of the frontier is a useful one that has a long and respected academic pedigree—not only in history but in other fields as well. In this study, building on the tradition in political geography, I use “frontier” to refer to a vague, spatially diffuse division between social groups. A “boundary,” likewise, is also a social interface, but it is one that is relatively well defined—a line that can easily be drawn on a map, as opposed to a zone. Finally, “border” is used in this study as a generic term for social divisions regardless of degree of geographic clarity. I will be the first to admit that I have not been completely consistent in my use of these words (if only to preserve a modicum of variety and readability), but where I have deviated from them, the intended meaning should be clear from context.