This book is the first in a four-volume series, The Social History of Postwar Japan. Each volume is prefaced by the editor, Yasuda Tsuneo, who writes, ‘…from the period of rapid economic growth, which significantly restructured Japanese society, to the dismantling of those structures in the 1980s….this series examines the history of efforts to transform the crumbling remnants of Japanese society into a new society.’

As the series is organized around the experiences of individuals in society, the four volumes are entitled: ‘Changing society, changing individuals,’ ‘Consumers of society,’ ‘Society's challengers,’ and ‘People living at society's edge.’ This review is of volume 1, in which the society and individuals under consideration were changing in the context of twentieth century, postwar Japan. It seems fair to say that the book's contributors have tailored their depictions of social history from the era of rapid economic growth onwards to fit how individuals were changing during the twentieth century.

The first chapter by Takaoka Hiroyuki, ‘From wartime to postwar: The 1950s as the 'postwar' starting point,’ serves as an introduction to the compilation. Instead of a clean break from militaristic regime to postwar reform, many aspects of wartime society remained entrenched after the war, especially its ‘dual structure,’ which Takaoka discusses. The book also examines the connections between postwar Japanese society and social shifts taking place around the world. The purpose of this volume is to reassess the historical position of Japanese society.
society by questioning the structures of economic and political power that emerged from the rapid growth era in light of the poverty and neoliberalism that we see today.

In part one of the book, two articles address the general theme of the compilation, that is, the ‘framework of postwar Japanese society.’ The first piece is ‘The historical imagery of Japan's 'high speed growth' in the twentieth century,’ by Asai Yoshio; the second is ‘Population shifts and social concepts,’ by Takaoka Hiroyuki. The article by Asai elaborates on the context and characteristics of the years of sharply rising economic growth, while Takaoka expounds on the ‘framework’ as it pertains to problems that occasionally arose due to population shifts during the period.

Part two, ‘The structures of political and economic power,’ includes ‘Portraits of postwar elites in the realms of politics, bureaucracy, and finance in the rapid growth era,’ by Kikuchi Nobuteru; ‘The changing face of Liberal Democratic Party rule--floating voters and the mid-1970s transition,’ by Nakakita Koji; ‘Corporate society--the apparatus of 'affluence',' by Takeda Haruhito; and ‘Local communities in the midst of 'development',' by Okada Tomohiro. Kikuchi argues that elite politicians, ministry officials and business leaders encouraged the private sector to increase export competitiveness because they shared the belief that the shortcomings of a centrally controlled economy led to Japan's defeat in the Pacific War.

Nakakita takes up the question of why the LDP was able to remain in power for so long. The LDP's electoral success is commonly attributed to pork barrel politics, but Nakakita argues that the LDP's ability to appeal to floating voters beginning in the 1970s was more important. Takeda discusses the effects of corporations acting as major sources of social organization and integration during the rapid growth era. Takeda finds that corporations' role as societal organizers meant that people who were not employed or were incapable of working were highly marginalized. Society's lack of responsiveness to the needs of such marginalized people would eventually foment social unrest.
Okada presents two sides of public works and state-led regional development. On the one hand, regional cities and rural areas alike underwent a great deal of haphazard development. On the other hand, Okada also introduces examples of localities that plotted their own courses of sustainable development.

Part three of the book, ‘‘Competition’ and ‘poverty’ in the midst of social change,’ includes ‘Forms of ‘poverty’,’ by Iwata Masami, and ‘Society under neoliberalism--Aspects of reaching consensus,’ by Ozawa Hiroaki. The book concludes with Takaoka Hiroyuki’s ‘The questions of today.’ Iwata presents a striking account of how ‘poverty’ changed from the 1940s to the 1990s. Ozawa provides details on political forays into neoliberalism dating back to the Nakasone administration. Takaoka presents an overview of each article in the volume in the final chapter.

The chief contributions of this book can be found in the articles in parts two and three which clarify a variety of issues such as how elites shared common experiences and aims, the fact that enduring LDP rule was due more to the party's ability to change tactics rather than its ability to change internally, the intertwining of corporations and society, the examples—albeit few—of resolutely independent local communities working to realize their own visions of development, and the concrete historicity of poverty. One cannot overlook these issues and still see the full picture of how Japanese society was reshaped by the years of rapid economic growth.

In this latter part of the review, I discuss some aspects of the first three parts of the book that gave me pause. First, there is somewhat ambiguous wording throughout the book. For example, the opening chapter, ‘From wartime to postwar’ is subtitled ‘The 1950s as the 'postwar' starting point.’ The author, Takaoka, writes ‘Japan's social structure after the 1950s differed substantially from what it had been prior to that time.’ However, to be frank, readers will likely find it hard to tell what the contributors' views of the 1950s are. Also ambiguous is exactly what the authors have in mind in the many instances when they refer to ‘society’ and
‘social structure.’ The apparent emphasis on employment and hiring structures is also difficult to understand.

Second, I was also puzzled by the consistent presentation of postwar Japan as a ‘single nation history’ in the book. Clearly the occupation years are not the focus of this book. Nevertheless, discussing the era of rapid economic growth without referring to the international context of the time can only take you so far in understanding the period. The Cold War generated a variety of specific conditions, such as demand for goods for the US military and a major domestic crisis over the nature of the Japan-US relationship, whose effects extended beyond the economy and politics to society and culture. In other words, the single nation history approach leaves out too many factors that shaped postwar society. As I see it, this approach is a major reason why this book lacks a clear focus, a lack that was foreshadowed by the vagueness of the book's title, ‘Changing society, changing individuals.’

Of course, this is not to say that all of the articles are single nation histories. In ‘The historical imagery of Japan's 'high speed growth' in the twentieth century,’ Asai recognizes the international ties that shaped Japan's economic development. He goes beyond comparing Japan with Western Europe and North America by comparing Japan with South Korea's ‘Han River miracle.’ However, Asai's emphasis on how international ties transcending national boundaries affected Japan's development during the period in question is the exception in the book. Moreover, other contributors offer some comparisons of Japan's rapid growth period with other nations, but they use an inapt comparative method.

Third, most of the authors that make cross-national comparisons opt to contrast Japan in the midst of its period of economic expansion with so-called ‘advanced’ Western nations. Despite their cursory treatment of cross-national comparisons, several authors do point out differences between Japan and Western Europe.

From the 1950s to the early 1970s, the gross national product of countries in Western Europe and Japan grew quickly. It was natural for people at that time to measure Japan's
progress against that of the West, including the United States. Since that time, however, it is no secret that many nations have experienced, or are experiencing, extended periods of strong economic growth. Beyond South Korea, which was discussed by Asai, the authors could have compared Japan with Taiwan, China, Thailand, Indonesia, India, Russia, Brazil, or South Africa, among others. This is not to say that all of these nations need to be compared to Japan. My point is that we are past the point where considering only Western nations will suffice. Examining other nations' more recent experiences with rapid economic expansion will clarify what was, or was not, unique in the case of Japan.

Whether explicit or not, the articles in this book share a common welfare state ideal. That ideal seems to have affected how Asai and Takaoka chose to grapple with Japan's postwar rapid economic growth era. The welfare state ideal is closely related to the single nation history methodology. Welfare state formation and expansion were products of the twentieth century, but the welfare state itself is premised on the eighteenth century concept of the modern nation-state.

As is well known, the goals of the nation-state are cast as the goals of the populace, thereby raising national consciousness. As the state does more to support education and the economy, people grow more dependent on the state and local structures and communities are diminished. Historically, there has been a tendency for people under state control to demand that the state acquire yet more power.

Incidentally, although it is said that the welfare state has become a global phenomenon, some government welfare policies for the poor are selective rather than universal. In 1935, the United States, a nation seemingly dedicated to fostering a pro-business climate, enacted the Wagner Act, which allowed the strong labor unions to engage in collective bargaining with employers. A single nation history is an appropriate way to examine the history of labor unions in the United States in the 1930s, but considering only domestic factors is no longer sufficient when studying more recent events such as environmental problems,
firms’ global expansion and the accompanying decline of employment security, and widening socioeconomic gaps that cross national borders.

These are the issues facing us today. To understand the twentieth century, we must go beyond twentieth-century style problem setting. We are, after all, living in another century now.