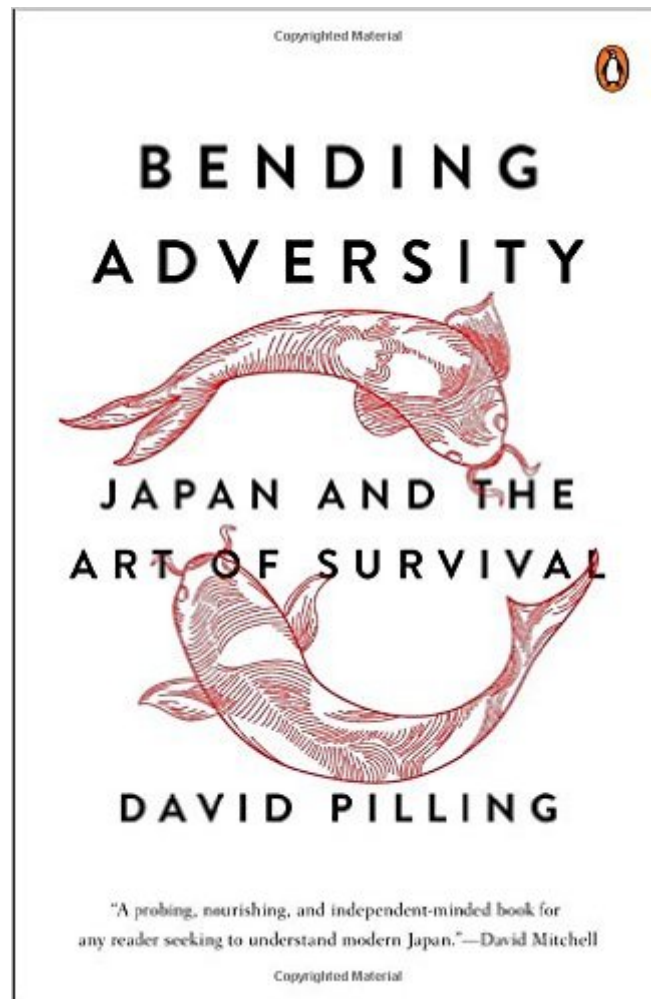


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# Bending Adversity: Japan And The Art Of Survival



## Synopsis

“An excellent book...” —The Economist  
Financial Times Asia editor David Pilling presents a fresh vision of Japan, drawing on his own deep experience, as well as observations from a cross section of Japanese citizenry, including novelist Haruki Murakami, former prime minister Junichiro Koizumi, industrialists and bankers, activists and artists, teenagers and octogenarians. Through their voices, Pilling’s *Bending Adversity* captures the dynamism and diversity of contemporary Japan. Pilling’s exploration begins with the 2011 triple disaster of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown. His deep reporting reveals both Japan’s vulnerabilities and its resilience and pushes him to understand the country’s past through cycles of crisis and reconstruction. Japan’s survivalist mentality has carried it through tremendous hardship, but is also the source of great destruction: It was the nineteenth-century struggle to ward off colonial intent that resulted in Japan’s own imperial endeavor, culminating in the devastation of World War II. Even the postwar economic miracle—the manufacturing and commerce explosion that brought unprecedented economic growth and earned Japan international clout might have been a less pure victory than it seemed. In *Bending Adversity* Pilling questions what was lost in the country’s blind, aborted climb to #1. With the same rigor, he revisits 1990—the year the economic bubble burst, and the beginning of Japan’s “lost decades”—to ask if the turning point might be viewed differently. While financial struggle and national debt are a reality, post-growth Japan has also successfully maintained a stable standard of living and social cohesion. And while life has become less certain, opportunities—in particular for the young and for women—have diversified. Still, Japan is in many ways a country in recovery, working to find a way forward after the events of 2011 and decades of slow growth. *Bending Adversity* closes with a reflection on what the 2012 reelection of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, and his radical antideflation policy, might mean for Japan and its future. Informed throughout by the insights shared by Pilling’s many interview subjects, *Bending Adversity* rigorously engages with the social, spiritual, financial, and political life of Japan to create a more nuanced representation of the oft-misunderstood island nation and its people. The Financial Times’s David Pilling quotes a visiting MP from northern England, dazzled by Tokyo’s lights and awed by its bustling prosperity: “If this is a recession, I want one.” Not the least of the merits of Pilling’s hugely enjoyable and perceptive book on Japan is that he places the denunciations of two allegedly “lost decades” in the context of what the country is really like and its actual achievements. The Telegraph (UK) “Pilling, the Asia editor of the Financial Times, is perfectly placed to be our guide, and his insights are a real rarity when very few Western journalists communicate the essence of the world’s third-largest economy in anything

but the most superficial ways. Here, there is a terrific selection of interview subjects mixed with great reportage and fact selection... he does get people to say wonderful things. The novelist Haruki Murakami tells him: "When we were rich, I hated this country" ... well-written... valuable. Publishers Weekly (starred): "A probing and insightful portrait of contemporary Japan."

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I am only in the early chapters of Pilling's astonishing book, and already I am amazed at how deeply affected I am by it, both intellectually, and emotionally. Perhaps it helps to have been a foreign journalist in Japan myself, during the bubble decade of the 1980s, though I don't mean to dispel the opinions of others simply because I share Pilling's experience as an expat journalist/Asian studies academic, but these experiences allow me to bring to his book special insights that afford me the privilege of stating without equivocation that his thesis is entirely on the mark, or as the elder Japanese archers I studied with might say, ATARI! [No, not the checkered gam-software manufacturer.]. Pilling's is precisely the sort of book we expat journalists used to read with embarrassment, almost every chapter containing a statement which we announced aloud to ourselves, or to the room, "I wish I'd written that!" I am especially impressed with the early chapter that deconstructs popular and long-held myths about Japan. And the fact that he embarrasses Rush Benedict's opus of disinformation, "The Chrysanthemum and the Sword", is especially daring and refreshing. I concur. I remember whole sections of bookstores in Japan featuring books on the subject by half-informed foreigners and self-deluded natives that attempted to explain Japan, all for

naught. I dare say Pilling's book comes alarmingly close to achieving this elusive goal.

"To instruct and to delight", which Horace called the aim of the poet, is at least as appropriate for the non-fiction author. All too often, instruction spills over into lecturing and any delight is swamped by turgid prose. David Pilling's "Bending Adversity", however, is a sterling example of just how instructive and delightful non-fiction can be. Mr. Pilling, the Financial Times Tokyo bureau chief from 2002 to 2008, has an expert knowledge of Japan's economic and political systems. He also shows a perceptive appreciation for Japanese history and its culture. Finally, he is a gifted and entertaining writer, who can focus on touching vignettes or on complex ideas with equal precision. This is perhaps the best book I have read about Japan in quite a while; I strongly recommend it to anyone who is interested in where Japan is now. Mr. Pilling begins and ends with the triple shock of March 2011 -- the earthquake, the tsunami, and the release of radiation from the Fukushima nuclear plant. He brilliantly describes what the stricken area looked like after the disaster, and how people behaved during and after the crisis. They behaved very well, which brings him to his trope of "bending with adversity". The Japanese as a people, a friend tells him, are not destroyed by calamity, because they adapt, move on, and begin again. He explores this idea through the last 150 years of Japanese history, when violent change (the opening of Japan, Japan's defeat in World War 2) provoked dramatic adaptation. The middle part of the book discusses Japan's economic situation, and Mr. Pilling very pertinently points out that reports of its death have been exaggerated. He quotes a British parliamentarian, visiting Tokyo in the mid-2000's.

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