On a summer afternoon in 2002, I arrived in Tokyo with my family to begin the first leg of my research project on Japanese postal politics. Our visit did not begin well. Tired, hot, and hungry after a long day of travel, we felt our moods take a nosedive as we entered our empty apartment and realized that we had nothing to eat—or to eat with. Since I was the only Japanese speaker in our little group, I left the apartment in search of provisions.

After fifteen minutes or so of wandering through a maze of deserted side streets, I found a small grocer and stocked up on food and supplies. Jetlag then got the better of me. For what seemed like an hour, I meandered aimlessly through that neighborhood, my grocery bags growing heavier and heavier with each passing block. One of my milk cartons burst through its bag and exploded onto the pavement, drenching my shoes. I would have gladly asked someone for directions, but there was no one in sight.

Just as my irritability threatened to get the better of me, I heard the sound of a moped in the distance. It was a mail carrier on his rounds. He put-putted up to one house and then another, depositing his small bundles into each mailbox and then dropping the squeaky lids with a clang. When he was within a few feet of me, I stepped into his path and forced him to stop. “Please tell me how to get to the university guest house,” I pleaded. “I’m lost.”
Straddling his red moped, the mail carrier took a moment to look me over. He then reached for two of my bags, put them into the now empty box behind his seat, and motioned for me to follow him.

I marched dutifully behind my mail carrier as he wove his way toward my building. When we arrived, he silently handed me my bags, acknowledged my thanks with a nod of his head, and puttered off. I was impressed. “The Japanese post office is a fine institution,” I thought to myself as I trudged up the stairs to our apartment. “Maybe Koizumi should just leave it alone.”

In early 2002, despite Prime Minister Koizumi Juni’chirō’s resolve to carry out “structural reform with no sanctuaries” (seiiki naki kōzō kai-kaku), it appeared that the government would have no choice but to leave the post office alone. Local postmasters and their employees were lobbying hard against Koizumi’s proposed changes, while friends of the post office in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) heaped abuse on their leader for tampering with a near sacred institution. The media recounted stories of elderly Japanese in the countryside who depended on the local post office for their financial and shopping needs, and scores of books appeared extolling the postal system’s contributions to Japan’s economic, social, and cultural development. Meanwhile, foreigners like myself marveled at the high quality of service at the local post office, quick to compare it to the long queues and surly employees in facilities back home. Japanese citizens like—even love—their local post office, including many of those who support its transformation for financial or political reasons.

I had good reason to believe, in short, that mine would be a project on the politicization of the postal services and the failure of reform. Subsequent events threw me for a loop. After the 2002 passage of a modest set of bills to open the mail sector to limited participation by private firms and lay the institutional groundwork of Japan Post, a public corporation that began operations in 2003, Koizumi launched an all-out campaign to privatize the services (mail, savings, and insurance). Much to everyone’s surprise, Koizumi not only fulfilled many of his postal privatization objectives but also appeared to transform the very foundations of policymaking and electoral politics in Japan. So what began as a study of the politicization and resilience of the state-run postal
services soon expanded to include questions of institutional and political transformation. How did the postwar Japanese postal system become so heavily politicized and resistant to reform, only to succumb to comprehensive change under one man’s watch?

My objective in this book is to make sense of these seemingly contradictory trends of institutional “stickiness” and sudden change within the postal system by analyzing the interplay among the institutions, interests, and leaders involved in the system’s evolution from the early Meiji period until 2010, three years after postal privatization officially began. To that end, I explore how the institutional relationship between the postal system and the Japanese state positioned the former to play a leading role in the country’s political and economic development; how conservative politicians, the commissioned postmasters (tokutei yūbin-kyokuchō), and other interests built on the system’s historical institutional legacy to politicize the services after World War II; and how entrepreneurial bureaucrats and politicians took advantage of political and institutional changes at critical junctures in Japan’s modern history to introduce unanticipated changes to the postal services. Along the way, I identify the postal system’s remarkable range of economic, social, and cultural functions—functions that transformed the local post office into a near-sacred embodiment of tradition as Japan grappled with the challenges of globalization and its underlying free-market principles. In the concluding chapter, I look into the future of the postal system, assess the resilience of Koizumi’s reforms, and explore the significance of lingering opposition to the privatization of one of Japan’s most enduring social and political sanctuaries.

A Note on Theory, Methods, and Sources

In this book, I trace the history of Japanese postal politics as a case study of the timing of institutional change within the postal sector in relation to developments in broader institutional and political contexts. More specifically, while my analysis emphasizes institutional factors, both within and outside of the postal services, and their capacity to shape the broad parameters of change, I also recognize the ability of entrepreneurial leaders to put the postal services on surprising new paths—and of vested interests to prevent change from occurring at all. I pursue these and related points in greater detail in the Introduction.
Although this is primarily a book about Japan, no study of the Japanese postal system would be complete without references to the British system on which it was modeled. Thus, Chapter 1, which traces the evolution of the Japanese services from premodern times until World War II, highlights some of the similarities and differences between the two systems. The primary purpose of this comparison is to pinpoint the historical institutional foundations of the Japanese system’s postwar politicization—a phenomenon that was not duplicated in the postwar British case. But the comparison stops there. Since the modern Japanese and British postal systems embarked on vastly different political trajectories after their initial establishment, the remaining chapters focus on the institutional, interest group, and leadership variables that influenced the Japanese case.

Empirically—and in keeping with this book’s historical as well as political science focus—I have drawn from an eclectic array of primary and secondary sources. I conducted much of my historical research on Japan at Rikkyō University and the National Diet Library in Tokyo, and at the Nissan Institute of Japanese Studies at the University of Oxford. I also logged many hours at the government-run archives of the Communications Museum (Teishin sōgō hakubutsukan) in the Ōtemachi district of Tokyo, where I had unlimited access to government and other documents relating to the Japanese postal services. References in Chapter 1 to the nineteenth-century British case are the result of research that I conducted at the library systems of University of Oxford and the University of Edinburgh, and at the British Postal Museum and Archive in London.

Newspaper articles were very useful to me as I pieced together a chronology of postal events, as were the memoirs of several key figures in Japanese postal history. I also benefited from the many books on the postal system published during the 1990s and 2000s. Written primarily for a general audience, these volumes offer a revealing glimpse into the values and ideas that emerged from the services and that helped transform debates about postal reform into a veritable “culture war.”

Personal interviews were an important component of my research, although the results of these interviews were mixed. Given how politically explosive the notion of postal reform had become by the early 2000s, it was perhaps not surprising that bureaucrats and politicians were
guarded in their assessments of the functions and politics of the postal system, although a few provided me with frank commentary. I benefited particularly from my conversations with scholars who had researched and/or contributed to the administration or privatization of the postal services, and with journalists who had covered the “postal beat.” These men and women had fascinating stories to tell about the postmasters’ representative organizations, the policymaking process, Koizumi’s privatization plans, and the values and ideals that had come to be embodied in modern Japan’s state-run postal services.

I also relied heavily on conversations with active and retired commissioned postmasters. My first contact with the postmasters occurred quite by accident while sitting in the tiny, windowless reading room of the Communications Museum during that first summer in Tokyo. From the start, it was hard for me not to notice that virtually all of the Japanese assembled around me were elderly men. Two or three of them showed up every day, others once a week or every two weeks. All of them seemed to know one another. In time, I learned to distinguish the philatelists from the postal history buffs, and the Meiji from the postwar history specialists. I soon thought of them all as yūsei otaku—obsessive fans of the postal system.

After one the regulars broke the ice and asked me why I was spending so much time at the archive, I learned that most of my neighbors were retired postmasters. A few of them seemed a little suspicious of me when I explained what I was doing, but most went out of their way to help me. One of the amateur historians in the group, whose writings were filed away on the archival shelves, directed me to some very useful sources. Another, an octogenarian, offered me an impassioned account of the history of the commissioned post office system, describing the government’s alleged failure to properly compensate the prewar and wartime postmasters for their sacrifices on behalf of the “emperor’s post office.” Still another, a devotee of Maejima Hisoka (1835–1919; the Meiji founder of the modern Japanese postal system) and the leader of a regional chapter of Taiju zenkoku kaigi, the association of retired postmasters, invited me to his home in Kamakura and gave me a tour of his post office, now run by a former (female) employee. My visit, one of the highlights of my fieldwork, is briefly recounted at the beginning of Chapter 3.
To more fully understand the post office’s functions in less populated areas, I made two visits to the outskirts of Kitakyūshū City on the southernmost island of Kyushu. In August 2002, I toured several post offices and met with a group of postmasters who were active in the regional branch of Zentoku (Zenkoku tokutei yūbinkyoku-cho kai; the National Association of Commissioned Postmasters). Annoyed by the postal privatization movement, my hosts seemed confident that Koizumi was a passing phenomenon and that the political situation would “soon return to normal.” When I returned four years later, the postmasters were reeling from the changes wrought by Koizumi’s victories in 2005 and bracing themselves for the possible demise of the commissioned post office system. On both occasions, my hosts taught me about their profession and their politics, gave me access to some of their organization’s internal literature, and introduced me to their employees.

My personal interactions with the commissioned postmasters also led to some invaluable insights into the postal system’s cultural importance. While the postwar media uncovered instances of corruption among the postmasters and Koizumi focused his attention on the system’s financial and political ramifications, many postmasters around the country continued to uphold the values of Maejima’s innovations: financial stability, government paternalism, self-sacrifice on behalf of the common good, respect for local community, and many other values that we now tend to associate with a bygone era in Japan. Granted, we have good reason to suspect that many of these values had been reinvented or mythologized as the postmasters and other interest groups connected to the state-run services struggled to survive changing political and economic times. Nevertheless, these values resonated with ordinary Japanese over the generations as they struggled to adapt to the transformative pressures of political modernization, rapid economic growth, urbanization, unemployment, demographic change, and economic globalization.

Put simply, the local post office has become all but synonymous with a more “traditional” Japan. Thus, this book seeks not only to explain the political functions and institutional trajectory of the postal services, but also to highlight the post office’s role in helping ordinary Japanese navigate the winding roads of modernity.