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Book Review

Hard Times in the Hometown: A History of Community Survival in Modern Japan. By Martin Dusinberre

Hard Times in the Hometown: A History of Community Survival in Modern Japan. By Martin Dusinberre (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012. xiv plus 247 pp. \$55.00).

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Living and teaching English in the Japanese countryside has become a veritable rite of passage among the current younger generation of Japan scholars across the disciplines, this reviewer and author included. Dispatched to rural locales that even most Japanese people have never heard of, these scholars sometimes connect their time in Japan to their subsequent scholarly work. For Martin Dusinberre, this connection is direct and explicit. He returned to the site of his English-teaching years to write a history of modern Japan, from the nineteenth century to 2012, through the lens of Kaminoseki and its people. In his carefully written introduction,

Dusinberre has gone to great pains to justify the academic study of this region. For Japan specialists, his work fits into a historiography of local studies in which southwest Japan has been underrepresented, despite, or perhaps because of, the overwhelming number of southwest natives who dominated Japan's first modern government—the Meiji oligarchy. Resistance, cooperation, and negotiation of power and policy between the national government and local people in northeast or central Japan have been well-studied. As Dusinberre illustrates, the everyday lives of people in Kaminoseki, too, did not always reflect national trends.

The five-part book is divided by theme and chronology, with each chapter building upon the cast of historical figures, families, and industries featured in previous sections. Dusinberre paces himself well; he is in no rush to cover topics that might attract more attention than others, such as his timely discussion of the nuclear power industry in Japan. This allows him to tease out stories from the broad range of sources that might otherwise go neglected in a macro history. In parts one and two, for example, we find local families that benefited from maritime trade along the inland sea through an assortment of employments: buying and selling goods from other merchants hoping to make a profit in distant markets, maintaining warehouses for regional port trade while running inns on the side, and receiving privileges in exchange for various duties related to shipping by daimyo lords. These examples echo a point made by Amino Yoshihiko long ago, that the closer we look at the everyday lives of commoners often mischaracterized as “agriculturists,” we find that a lack of land did not equate to poverty. They explored every source of income available and were not tied to any one employment. Local elites were equally complex in their actions during the violent years of the mid 1860s, for example, participating in an attack on a local domain ship while being aware that the same domain was a source of trade revenue.

The fall of the Tokugawa regime in 1868 affected the Kaminoseki area on several fronts. The economy suffered a double blow when domain-related trade and monopolistic privileges disappeared with the domains themselves, and increased contact with the West led to cheaper salt and cotton imports that undercut local products. But some locals proved resilient; over the course of several chapters, the author tells us how villagers migrated to Hawaii, Korea, and California in search of better income. As members of “transnational families,” these, mostly men, sent money back to their hometown to build schools, statues, and other public institutions—an international story at the local level usually lost in most macro histories. This does much to dispel the image of village Japan as being isolated from globalization at a personal level. Likewise, the chapters on postwar Kaminoseki complicate the dominant narrative of postwar growth.

Even non-specialists will, by now, know Japan's predicament with nuclear power, which supplies roughly thirty percent of the electricity. The timeliest portion of this book, a topic that receives slightly more attention than others, is the masterful micro history of the pro-nuclear and anti-nuclear tension in the village. During the 1980s, Chugoku Electric identified Kaminoseki as a possible site for a desperately needed atomic power plant, and most Kaminoseki officials were happy to oblige. The decades-long conflict between mostly older, elite Kaminoseki families who favored bringing the power plant to Kaminoseki, and the anti-nuclear faction, affected everything from local elections, and festivals, to membership in civic groups like the PTA. One Shinto shrine was even left off a local map because the priest was perceived as being pronuclear!

One of the strengths of this book is its broad chronological scope. Most specialist books in any field of modern history tend to focus on a decade or two, but Dusinberre weaves together over a century of local history, and necessarily so. Understanding the twists and turns of the nuclear issue alone, for example, is made richer by tying hometown structures of the nineteenth century to the present. Dusinberre carefully avoids simple teleology. In fact, his work highlights the importance of historical dead ends and why they matter. In this way, his book makes a good supplementary reading in a modern Japanese or East Asian history course, with students following along, over the course of a semester, how Kaminoseki compares to national and international trends.

There are a lot of topics covered in this well-written book. At just about two hundred pages (not including notes), the book follows a brisk pace—dwelling in the local details, but, for the most part, not wallowing in them. Any number of topics could be the focus of an entire article or book. This in no way makes the book shallow, but, with so much going on, it means that some arguments seem less explored and earthshattering than others. The discussion of local nuclear power issues, however, is particularly strong. He has continued to write about nuclear power issues in Kaminoseki and Japan more generally, articles I highly recommend.¹

Endnote

1. See, for example, the following. Martin Dusingberre, “DIMBY: Kaminoseki and the making/breaking of modern Japan,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 10 (2012): Issue 32, No. 1. <http://www.japanfocus.org/-Martin-Dusingberre/3805>.