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Review of *The Chaos and Cosmos of Kurosawa Tokiko: One Woman’s Transit from Tokugawa to Meiji Japan* by Laura Nenzi

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Partners in Print will certainly find its way to readers in various disciplines. The introduction in particular offers a succinct outline of the many aspects of the social and cultural prominence of the city of Edo, its inhabitants, and its publishing industry, which will be of use to students in courses on Japanese art, the history of the Japanese book, the social history of Japan, and so on. The four case studies, in all their complexity, will be valuable references for those who investigate the same or comparable works. For those scholars who aim to publish their own studies of similar materials, it will be challenging to maintain the standard set by Davis with regard to precision of visual and textual investigation and application of multifaceted analysis.

A final thought: Partners in Print is richly illustrated in color throughout, providing the reader with the opportunity to assess the images almost as if he or she were part of that floating world. Because of advanced digital reproduction technologies, even scholarly publications can now offer a standard of printing so high that the quality of reproduced images is almost on a par with the artworks being discussed. It is a pity that a similar degree of care and attention was not given to the issue of kanji: the book contains not a single Japanese character outside those in the photographic reproductions—not even in the notes or in the index. My criticism here extends beyond the book under review to many scholarly publications of this kind. In this particular case, it is evident that Davis has executed a tremendous amount of expert work in transcribing and translating primary texts. The scholarly and educational value of this book would have been even higher still had the partners who printed it employed the full extent of the technology available to them.


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Laura Nenzi’s The Chaos and Cosmos of Kurosawa Tokiko is a microhistory of the largely unknown Kurosawa Tokiko, a woman who might have been completely forgotten had she not embarked on a journey from her native Mito domain to Kyoto to deliver a petition to Emperor Kōmei pleading for mercy on behalf of the Mito daimyo, Tokugawa Nariaki. Nariaki had been placed under house arrest for criticizing Ii Naosuke over signing treaties with Western countries. Tokiko was quickly imprisoned and released, banished to her home village, where she died in 1890 at age 85. Like other loyalists, including a handful of women, Tokiko received official recognition for her efforts by receiving posthumous court rank (zōi), thus gaining a secure position in loyalist history, at least, among local memory activists.

It is unclear whether the emperor received her petition, and even if he had, Nariaki died during his confinement in 1860, rendering Tokiko’s action relatively useless.
From the macrohistory perspective, Tokiko’s “impact factor” was low. But as Nenzi argues, in microhistory results are not as important as the process, as the strategies and creativity of ordinary people in their daily lives, some of whom, like Tokiko, embark on extraordinary adventures. Nenzi cares about the nuances that are missing in macrohistory. She offers Tokiko as a lens for looking at a broad range of issues in nineteenth-century Japan, including gender, political activism, religion, and rural commoner life. Tokiko, Nenzi suggests, is a case study for how people fit into the sometimes disparately studied subfields of intellectual, social, and political history, and how Tokiko’s story fills in gaps left out of macrohistorical depictions of women, the Meiji Restoration, and penal histories, among others.

Part 1 sets the stage for Tokiko’s life. Here, Nenzi invokes the literary symbol of the sparrow, flitting through the chapters from the contextual “nest” of Tokiko’s home to the “clipping of her wings” when imprisoned in the infamous Tenmachō prison; Nenzi, much like a biographer, clearly enjoys her subject. Tokiko worked as a peddler and teacher and helped operate the family Shugendō center, occupations that connected her to Mito domain warriors, poets, and travelers through whom she would form opinions about events beyond her village. A significant contribution of Nenzi’s work is the way in which she connects Tokiko’s religious practice, devotional and occupational, to her developing political consciousness.

Part 2 builds upon this foundation by starting with a “script”—the narrative, possibly written by Tokiko after the fact, of her transition to political activism. Nenzi provides an interesting analysis of the religious work from which Tokiko would draw inspiration and strategies for action. For example, Tokiko ascribed a comet sighting in 1858 as a sign that she should embark on a petition journey to Kyoto. But, as Nenzi carefully points out, even this putative sign appeared in documents only after Tokiko was arrested in Kyoto. In other words, Nenzi keeps one eye on the pitfalls of historical memory while recreating Tokiko’s life. Nonetheless, Tokiko’s chance encounters, literary knowledge, and poetic practice help explain her decision to advocate for her punished lord Nariaki.

Tokiko finally arrived in Kyoto in 1859 and delivered her petition in long poem form, a style that allowed her to express her feelings about Nariaki, Ii, and Emperor Kōmei without being limited by length or poetic conventions. Moreover, a prose essay would have been deemed inappropriate for a woman. Despite her connections to well-placed Kyoto loyalists, her writing probably did not reach the emperor. Nevertheless, she became one of only two women in the bakumatsu period to be arrested for political activity not connected to a husband’s actions. Nenzi weaves together Tokiko’s intellectual and occupational influences, formulating a brief analysis of her subject’s imprisonment in Tokyo and Kyoto. Aside from an illness, Tokiko is released relatively unscathed, suffering only “medium banishment,” and is sent back to her homeland.

The third part of the book covers Tokiko’s post-Meiji Restoration life and how her life story changed long after her death. Like much of the book, religion loomed large
as a theme in Tokiko’s life as she navigated the creation of state Shinto and its effect on local religious communities. After her death, her reputation was narrated by memory activists, mostly local historians, government officials, and the like, who wanted to promote local contributions to the national historical landscape. With each reapropriation, parts of her gender, background, religious experience, and so on were dropped or changed to suit the prevailing attitudes of the time.

Nenzi has taken great pains to justify this account of Tokiko’s life. First, she argues that her subject is worthy of attention because of the large paper trail Tokiko left. This is a nontrivial reason, as Laurel Ulrich demonstrated in her Pulitzer-prize winning microhistory based on an immense diary that was kept daily for twenty-seven years by an American midwife.\(^1\) Imprisonment and religious practice are just two of many themes that historians will find of interest in Nenzi’s study, which is based on Tokiko’s memoirs and other writings.

Second, Nenzi defends her study against those who might point out that there is already an account of a female commoner who was an imperial loyalist during the Meiji Restoration, Anne Walthall’s biography *The Weak Body of a Useless Woman.*\(^2\) Nenzi notes that an anonymous reviewer of an earlier Tokiko-related article she had written argued, “a gendered history of late-Tokugawa loyalism already existed” and, by implication, “the case for gender was closed.” She responds that “by the same token, one must assume that the publication of a study of Yoshida Shōin would have made subsequent monographs on Sakamoto Ryōma or Saigō Takamori repetitive and unnecessary, for the history of male loyalism had already been written” (p. 3). Popular culture and historical memory have overplayed Sakamoto and Saigō’s influence on Japanese history, but those were hardly studies of little-known individuals. Nenzi is right to caution against becoming jaded against gender as a meaningful paradigm, but as in any disciplinary field—memory studies, intellectual history, or social history, for example—the most powerful studies are those that engage, challenge, and revitalize those fields and, at best, answer larger historical problems.

In other words, microhistory can be tricky. One colleague remembered a talk given by Carlo Ginzburg, one of microhistory’s most famous practitioners, where the introducer said of his work, “don’t try this at home.” Ginzburg used the limited materials available about a sixteenth-century Italian miller to make a historiographical argument, unique at that time, regarding popular culture in early modern Europe.\(^3\) In other words, his subject was the locus, rather than the focus, of the book. As a locus, the individual acts as a lens for deep analysis that is often accompanied by a sustained argument within a certain methodological, theoretical, or historiographical field. The

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details are a means to a grander end. Nenzi, too, accomplishes this in places by offering brief alternative perspectives on macrohistory. At times, Tokiko becomes the book’s focus, which makes it more difficult to see the historiographical takeaway. But presentation rather than representation is this microhistory’s strength. *The Chaos and Cosmos of Kurosawa Tokiko* would be a great text for an undergraduate Japanese history course, providing students with a case study of how different historiographical themes converge in the life of one individual.

**Doctors of Empire: Medical and Cultural Encounters between Imperial Germany and Meiji Japan.** By Hoi-Eun Kim. University of Toronto Press, 2014. 249 pages. Hardcover $55.00; softcover $29.95.

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*Doctors of Empire* begins with an evocative scene of the unveiling of two bronze busts on the campus of Tokyo Imperial University in 1907—a lively event, attended by members of the academic and diplomatic communities, that provides an excellent entry into Hoi-Eun Kim’s study of the medical and cultural encounters between Germany and Japan. In honor of the two German physicians whose contributions were being celebrated that day—Erwin Baelz and Julius Scriba—the dean of the Faculty of Medicine, Aoyama Tanemichi, rose to give a speech in fluent German that emphasized the strength of German medicine in Japan and suggested that the relationship between Japan and Germany was a colonial one, at least as far as medical science was concerned. While some attendees were reportedly displeased by Aoyama’s assessment of Japan’s status as “colonial,” historians in recent years have found colonial and postcolonial examinations to be a productive way of considering the history of Japanese medicine.1 In this book, Kim covers well-trodden ground but with a specialized focus on German-Japanese relations. His highly readable discussion of the significance of the German model for Japanese medicine provides a welcome new addition to scholarly literature in English while also taking into account the historiography in German. Kim tries to emphasize both sides of this reciprocal yet unequal relationship, writing with a fresh eye for the multifaceted cultural encounters that it engendered.

According to Kim’s research, between 1,150 and 1,200 Japanese students (he cites different figures on pages 5 and 61 of the book) learned medicine in Germany and other German-speaking regions in Europe between the years 1868 and 1914. Even larger numbers of students came into contact with German medicine in Japan through the

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