

Japan and Okinawa: Structure and Subjectivity

Review >
Japan

The last decade in Japanese Studies has been marked by a deep interest in Japanese minorities, namely the Ainu, Koreans, Okinawans, and *burakumin*.¹ Scholars have embarked on a mission to deconstruct the myth of the unique and homogenous Japanese nation. The book *Japan and Okinawa*, which deals with Okinawan identity, is an excellent contribution to this deconstruction.

By Stanislaw Meyer

Okinawa, known in the past as the Kingdom of Ryukyu, was incorporated into the Japanese state by force in 1879. Although Japan succeeded in assimilating its southernmost province, it never treated it as an integral part of so-called 'Japan proper'. Notwithstanding the terrible sacrifice that Okinawa was forced to make during the Second World War, it would later be abandoned and ceded to the USA. Even today, thirty years after reverting to Japan, Okinawa is still disproportionately burdened with the presence of American military forces.

Japan and Okinawa is divided in two parts, 'Structure' and 'Subjectivity', consisting of fourteen essays covering various aspects of modern Okinawa. Part one discusses the political and economical structure that holds Okinawa hostage, and the ways in which Okinawans are trying to loosen its constraints. The province's main problem, we learn from the essay by Gavan McCormack, is its heavy dependence upon economic development, designed, sponsored, and controlled by the Japanese state. This makes Okinawa rely mainly on tourism, revenues from mil-

itary bases, and public construction works. Since the government is not willing to give up the military bases (see the chapters by Gabe Masaaki and Ōta Masahide), and the bases obscure the development of Okinawa, economic growth can only be sustained through the promotion of public construction works and tourism, both of which have almost reached their limits in terms of opportunities. The Okinawans are trying to break this vicious circle by promoting an idea of a free-trade zone, which would help Okinawa emerge as a self-sustaining microregion in Asia. This plan, however, meets with little support in Tokyo, as the government fears the prospect of 'one state, two systems' as well as a liberalization of the market (see the chapter by Glenn D. Hook). Still, as Ōta Masahide informs us, the 'Okinawa problem' is not only a matter of the government's lack of good will. It is also a matter of omnipotent Japanese bureaucracy which does not want to give up its power and which obstructs the government's efforts to decentralize the state.

Part two, 'Subjectivity', gives us several different insights into Okinawan identity. The variety of subjects discussed corroborates the idea this iden-

tity is highly complex and ambiguous. Richard Siddle examines the revival of Okinawan ethnicity and demonstrates how the Okinawan people are trying to gain worldwide recognition by drawing upon the notion of 'indigenous people'. Miyume Tanji, on the other hand, examines voices of Okinawan women and environmentalists who seek international support for their struggle against, respectively, military violence and the 'construction state'. These two essays demonstrate that Okinawa negotiates and articulates identity not only in reference to Japan proper. Yet, Japan still seems to be the leitmotif in the Okinawan narrative. Julia Yonetani discusses the controversy over attempts to politicize memories of the Okinawa Battle, and in her chapter we learn how sensitive the issue of 'being Japanese' is in Okinawa.

This book deserves special credit because it breaks with certain conventional approaches towards the study of Okinawa. It proposes we stop looking at the province as a mere victim of Japanese and American imperialism and colonization, an image we have tended to take for granted thanks to sympathetic studies by, for example, Kerr (1958) or Christy (1997). Okinawa,

we learn, is not a passive subject in a history of subjugation, owing her 'Okinawanness' only to unilateral designation on the part of the powers to which she was subjugated. The book demonstrates that the political and economical structure imposed upon Okinawa is double-faced: on the one hand it constrains the right to self-determination, but on the other it provides opportunities and space within which Okinawans can realize and articulate their identity. As Glenn Hook and Richard Siddle emphasize in their introduction, Okinawans, in spite of being 'subjected', do have the power to negotiate, challenge, and even subvert the structural constraints. To what extent they can turn their disadvantageous position into benefits depends on how they negotiate their political principles, history, identity, culture, and environment.

Politics and recent history predominate in the book and it is to be regretted that culture has been covered only rather superficially in two essays. Also, there is

little reference to the pre-war years and the history of Ryukyu. Still, the contemporary relevance of the examined topics and the innovative approach place this work among the most important works in Okinawan Studies. It is an excellent book that should be recommended to all interested in contemporary Japan. <

- Hook, Glenn D. and Richard Siddle (eds), *Japan and Okinawa: Structure and Subjectivity*, London: RoutledgeCurzon (2003), pp. 255, ISBN 0-415-29833-4

References

- Christy, Alan, 'The Making of Imperial Subjects', in: Barlow, Tani E. (ed.), *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia*, Durham and London: Duke University Press (1997).
- Kerr, George, *Okinawa: The History of an Island People*, New York: Charles and Tuttle (1958).

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- 1 Descendants of the 'untouchable' outcasts, severely discriminated in Japanese society.