Japan and Okinawa: Structure and Subjectivity

By Stanislaw Meyer

In 1554 and was reprinted as in 1618 and 1644. In the introduction to Japan and Okinawa, which deals with Okinawan identity, is an excellent contribution to this deconstruction.

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 held Okinawa hostage, and the ways in which Okinawans are trying to loosen its constraints. The province’s main problem, we learn from the essay of Brian J. McCormack, is its heavy dependence upon economic development, designed, sponsored, and controlled by the Japanese state. This makes Okinawa’s identity mainly on tourism, revenues from military bases, and public construction works. Since the government is not willing to give up the existing bases (see the chapters by Gabe Masaki and Ota 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 a new, 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 sees the prospect of ‘one state, two systems’ as a threat to its control of Okinawa. Will it be a matter of omnipotent Japanese bureaucracy that 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 identity 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’. Miyune 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 Okinawa literature.

Julia Yoneyama discusses the controversies over attempts to politicize memories of the Okinawa Bitter Winter, 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 to the study of Okinawa. It proposes looking at Okinawa as a province as a mere victim of Japanese and American imperialism and colonization, an image we have been told to take for granted thanks to sympathetic studies by, for example, Kerr (1958) and Christy (1997).

Okinawa, we learn, is not a passive subject in a history of subjugation, owing her ‘Okinawan’ business only to unilateral designations on the part of the powers to which she was subjugated. The book demonstrates that the political and economic 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 for Okinawans to find ways to realize and articulate their identity.

As Glenn Hook and Richard Siddle emphasize in their introduction, Okinawans, in spirit 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 predominately dominate 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 contents 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.

References


Stanislaw Meyer, MA is a PhD candidate at the Department of Japanese Studies of the University of Hong Kong. He specializes in the modern history of Okinawa.

Japan and Okinawa: Structure and Subjectivity

By Stanislaw Meyer

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 Margaretta Winkel

Dordonæus in Japan

Dordonæus in Japan

Rembert Dordonaus, the Latin name of Rembert Dodoneus (1517-1585), was a famous herbalist, born in Mechelen, in what is now Belgium, and at the time, the Spanish Netherlands. What is remarkable about him as a scientist is that his work had a significant impact in Japan in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Dordonæus’ herbal, which influenced botanical developments in Japan, was first published as Cviðjvedeck in 1534 and was reprinted as Cruydt-boeck in 1618 and 1644. In the introduction to Dordonæus in Japan, Vande Walle defines its purpose as ‘the study of the science of translation and the translation of science’. It endeavours to trace the effects of these translations further into understanding the significant visual impact of scientific illustrations at that time.

The book itself is well designed, uniformly and in style, and is conveniently presented. More than one hundred illustrations give a good insight into the depictions of herbs and other scientific illustrations in European scientific books, as well as their transformed, Japanese appearance. They are a joy to the eye, but also an absolute necessity in understanding the significant visual impact of scientific illustrations at that time.

The Japanese characters for the title of the work were chosen in consultation with Akiyama, interested in contemporary Japan. The book itself is well designed, uniformly and in style, and is conveniently presented. More than one hundred illustrations give a good insight into the depictions of herbs and other scientific illustrations in European scientific books, as well as their transformed, Japanese appearance. They are a joy to the eye, but also an absolute necessity in understanding the significant visual impact of scientific illustrations at that time.

The Japanese characters for the title of the work were chosen in consultation with Akiyama, interested in contemporary Japan. The book itself is well designed, uniformly and in style, and is conveniently presented. More than one hundred illustrations give a good insight into the depictions of herbs and other scientific illustrations in European scientific books, as well as their transformed, Japanese appearance. They are a joy to the eye, but also an absolute necessity in understanding the significant visual impact of scientific illustrations at that time.