



Politics, History and International Relations are front and centre in this June issue of *The Japan Society Review* which includes reviews of three recently published volumes on these topics. The first is *Transnational Nazism: Ideology and Culture in German-Japanese Relations, 1919-1936*, an academic monograph exploring German-Japanese relations during the interwar era from the standpoint of their civil societies. The second, *The Japan Affair*, an edited collection of journalistic essays which appeared in *The Japan Times*, focuses on the Anglo-Japanese relationship from the mid-1980s to the present. *Peak Japan* reflects on the recent political, economic and social changes and challenges that could define Japan's future.

Also offering a glimpse of Japanese history, but from a fictional point of view, the novel *Stranger in the Shogun's City* depicts the everyday life of nineteenth century Tokyo

(Edo) through the perspective of an ordinary woman, Tsuneno, who constantly struggles in the face of adversity. Its feminist approach and well-researched historical background makes this book a compelling summer read.

Finally, this issue also includes a review of *Kimono Couture: The Beauty of Chiso*, the catalogue of the homonymous exhibition to be held at the Worcester Art Museum, but which unfortunately had to be re-scheduled for later in the year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Its main focus is on the crafting practices behind kimono, telling the history of one of Japan's oldest kimono houses, Chiso, which was founded in 1555 and is still in operation today.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

Contents

- 1) *Transnational Nazism: Ideology and Culture in German-Japanese Relations, 1919-1936* by Ricky W. Law
- 2) *The Japan Affair* by David Howell
- 3) *Peak Japan* by Brad Glosserman
- 4) *Kimono Couture: The Beauty of Chiso* by Vivian Li and Christine Starkman
- 5) *Stranger in the Shogun's City* by Amy Stanley

Editor

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

Reviewers

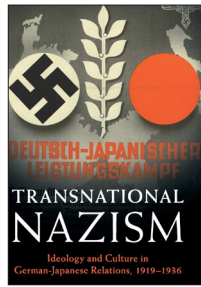
Duncan Bartlett, Carolin Becke, Francesco Cioffo, Laurence Green and Peter Kornicki.

Image: Detail from Chiso Co., Ltd, *Furisode with Wave and Crane Design*, Made for Nishimura Tokuko, the fourteenth Madame Nishimura, 1938, *Kimono Couture: The Beauty of Chiso*.

Transnational Nazism: Ideology and Culture in German-Japanese Relations, 1919-1936

by Ricky W. Law

Cambridge University Press (2019)
ISBN-13: 978-1108474634



Review by Francesco Cioffo

It is really difficult to say anything new when the topic has been analysed and scrutinised from almost every possible angle. Such is the case of the history of the Axis and the experiences of Italy, Germany and Japan in the first half of the 20th century. Yet Ricky Law has produced a remarkable monograph that aims to move forward our understanding of the relationship between the two countries by providing a fresh perspective from outside the palaces of power. Law's research should be contextualised within the broader emerging scholarly body of histories of Nazism and fascisms analysed from transnational and global perspectives.^[1] This new scholarship has seen fascism, Nazism and imperialism as closely connected phenomena. Such processes are not anymore studied from the perspectives of the nation-states, but a new focus has been put upon global exchanges and interactions among supporters of these ideologies. Empires and nations are thus seen through a new framework that would, supposedly, bring more clarity to the "external" factors that led to the emergences of ultra-nationalist and imperialist solidarities across the globe.

Transnational Nazism is a cultural history of German-Japanese relations during the interwar era from the standpoint of their civil societies. It is crucial to highlight that 'public discourse and perceptions mattered in interwar Japanese-German relations because few could afford firsthand interactions' (p.2). The high costs of transportation and the considerable time needed to travel between Germany and Japan made personal experiences of movement between the two countries, and knowledge of these countries, specific forms of social and cultural capital. Furthermore, the emergence of printed and visual media helped spread and the popularisation of certain ideas promulgated by these groups of "experts".

Law analyses a conspicuous number of primary sources in both German and Japanese from newspapers to movies, nonfiction books and academic lectures. While these types of sources have

been the bread and butter of cultural historians, the author cleverly adds language textbooks and documents from voluntary associations to provide a more nuanced perspective. The sources catered a wide range of strata within the German and Japanese civil societies from students and workers to the more affluent middle class. One of the most interesting information that we can extract from Law's study is, in fact, how groups negotiated transnational Nazism and how their perception always mutated over time.

This monograph sprung from the awareness that there still are significant gaps in our knowledge of German-Japanese interactions. While the Meiji era, WWI and the post-1936 (when the two nations signed the Anti-Comintern Pact) period are well documented in terms of cultural and diplomatic exchanges, the interwar period is peculiarly lacking. If we look away from state-to-state interactions, the book holds, we can find a vibrant community of German and Japanese intellectuals, journalists and educators were in a privileged position to cultivate and disseminate knowledge about Japan and Germany in their respective countries.

But what exactly is "transnational Nazism"? According to Law, it is an ideological outlook composed by two main angles. The German strand of transnational Nazism enabled Germans to incorporate into their heavily racialised world-view non-Aryan people like the Japanese. The perceived Japanese racial purity and its accomplishments as a "modern nation" made Japan a welcome party in the Nazi world. Conversely, the Japanese strand of transnational Nazism demonstrated how non-Germans understood and appropriated Nazism. Law points out that once Nazism travelled across national boundaries, it was moulded into another body of knowledge influenced by local specificities. In other words, Japanese commentators and scholars reshaped Nazism into a palatable ideology for the Japanese public, still centred on the image of Hitler and national-socialism, yet somehow less racialised than its original version.

However, as Law very interestingly demonstrates, interwar relations between Japanese and Germans were very unequal. In Japanese cinemas, newsstands and bookstores the market and interest for German-related intellectual and material commodities was far more variegated and developed than Japan-related books, movies and goods in Germany. More crucially, for many Japanese to learn German had specific ideological and practical connotations. To "conquer" German meant to become more civilized,

as well as enabling up-ward social mobility and access to restricted intellectual and political circles (p. 144). Needless to say, Japanese did not have the same level of cultural and social capital in German culture.

The book is divided in two main sections broadly structured around the primary source used for each chapter. The first section is dedicated to Transnational Nazism in Japan and the representation of Germany across several media. The second focuses upon the representation of Japan in German sources. In symmetric fashion, Chapters 1 and 5 analyse newspapers; chapters 3 and 7 instead have as central source nonfiction books. The rest of the chapters are more variegated. Law analyses representations of Germany in lectures and pamphlets (chapter 2), as well as language textbooks (chapter 4) in Japan, while he uses films (chapter 6) and voluntary associations' records (chapter 8) to better comprehend how Japan was translated for a German audience.

Transnational Nazism shines an important light upon how the German and Japanese civil societies were able to maintain crucial ties in a moment when diplomacy was almost completely absent. Ultimately,

this is a book that enables us to see beyond state-centred narratives and it helps us understand how ideas circulate and evolve across social strata.

However, while we can easily understand "transnational Nazism" through the practices and exchanges of these groups, it is arguably harder to distinguish how this new terminology might further our knowledge of the topic. Perhaps, the book would have benefited a more systematic theorisation of what "transnational Nazism" is and how it differs from the other tools that historians have used until now.

[1] Mammone, Andrea, *Transnational Neofascism in France and Italy* (Royal Holloway University of London, 2015); Finchelstein, Federico, *Transatlantic Fascism: Ideology, Violence, and the Sacred in Argentina and Italy, 1919-1945*, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010); Hofmann, Reto, *The Fascist Effect: Japan and Italy, 1915-1952* (Columbia University, 2015); also, the special issue of the *Journal of Global History* (2017), 12 on the "Axis empires" edited by Reto Hofmann and Daniel Hedinger. §

The Japan Affair

by David Howell

Gilgamesh Publishing (2020)
ISBN-13: 978-1908531452

Review by Peter Kornicki



Japan and Britain are not only democratic nation states that happen to be islands, as both the author of this book and the former Japanese ambassador, Tsuruoka Kōji, remind us in their prefaces, but they are also monarchies in a world where monarchies are increasingly rare and they both once had extensive empires, albeit for a much shorter period in the case of Japan. They have therefore often been compared with each other, but their relationship has certainly had its ups and downs since diplomatic relations were established 150 years ago. That is the coy way of referring to the years 1941-1945 when Britain and Japan were at war. But there were earlier 'downs' too, such as the Normanton Incident of 1886, when a British ship sank off Wakayama. The British captain, along with the European crew members, escaped in the lifeboat, leaving the Indian and Chinese crewmen, along with all the Japanese passengers, to drown. Britons were not subject to Japanese law at this time

owing to the 'unequal treaties', but following an outcry the captain was eventually brought before a consular court in Japan, which sentenced him to three months' imprisonment but made no provision for compensation for the deaths of the passengers. This was one of a number of incidents which led many Japanese at the time to nurture strong anti-British feelings, and who can blame them? The ups and downs, this episode reminds us, cut two ways.

Lord Howell of Guildford is a long-serving Conservative government minister who chaired the UK-Japan 2000 Group (current UK Japan 21st Century Group) in the closing years of the last century and who, since 1985, has been writing regularly for *The Japan Times*. This volume contains an edited collection of his columns with some interspersed comments to provide continuity and context. From the very first essay, written in 1985, several characteristics of these essays stand out clearly: firstly, there is the author's conviction that Britain has much to learn from Japan. Secondly, he distances himself from what used to be called the 'Japan-bashers', patiently showing that their understanding of Japan is shallow. And thirdly, as an economics graduate of Cambridge, he naturally focuses on bilateral trade issues, but he is

also concerned by Japan's standing in the world and participation in the international community.

To read these essays is to be reminded forcefully of the passion aroused by issues that are now largely forgotten, such as the trade imbalance in the 1980s and 1990s. It is also to be reminded of the extent to which the world and geopolitical balances have shifted, for what seems extraordinary now is how infrequently China appears in Howell's earlier essays until, in 1993, he presciently warned of the challenge that would be posed in the future by cheap, high-quality products from China. On the other hand, it is surprising how many themes are still with us today. One is the natural disasters to which Japan is prone, and in connection with the Kobe earthquake of 1995, in which 6000 people lost their lives, Howell draws attention to how much sympathetic interest this aroused around the world, seeing it as a sign of how much aware of Japan the world had become.

The same, of course, was true of the much more damaging Fukushima earthquake and tsunami of 2011. Another is the reform of the United Nations, which Howell first wrote about in 1986, pointing out the failure to reflect Japan's position in the world in the structure of the UN. Thirty-four years later, nothing has changed, and the UN remains a reflection not of current realities but of the world in 1945. And the third is the impact of the price of oil. In 2008 Howell wrote about the collapse of the price of oil in response to low demand, and that is also the subject of his most recent essay, published in *The Japan Times* on 31 May 2020 but not included in the this book, in which he

notes that what is pushing the oil price down now is not only low demand but also a growing resistance to the use of fossil fuels.

Howell wrote his preface in March 2020, just before the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic became horrifyingly apparent. In June, as I write this review, the death toll in Britain has already risen to some forty times that in Japan and continues to rise. What, many are wondering, has caused this disparity. As an indirect result of the pandemic, some of the expectations Howell expressed in the last couple of years have become more questionable. Writing in 2018, he stated that few thought President Trump would be denied a second term, but the picture is very different now. Similarly, he wrote in his preface that a No-Deal exit from the EU at the end of 2020 was 'very unlikely', but just three months later it is looking more likely than ever.

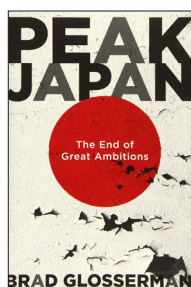
It is inevitable that some of these essays have not worn the passage of time well and that some readers may not be convinced by the arguments Howell advances. Readers may also be struck by the fact that the more recent essays are less focussed on the Anglo-Japanese relationship and consist instead of reflections of the turbulent changes of the last couple of years. Nevertheless, what runs through this book is Howell's conviction that the close connections between Britain and Japan have been mutually beneficial and deserve to be nurtured to our mutual benefit, and few members of the Japan Society will disagree with that. §

Peak Japan

by Brad Glosserman

Georgetown University Press (2019)
ISBN-13: 978-1626166684

Review by Duncan Bartlett



Crises are often catalysts for change. The recession which will inevitably follow the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the postponement or even the cancellation of the Olympics Games presents a moment of truth for Japan. Surely now is the perfect opportunity to embrace reform and challenge the complacency which has stymied progress for the past thirty years? Prime Minister Abe Shinzo asserted in a 2013 speech that 'Japan is not, and will never be, a tier-two country'.

So what can it now do to assert this bold ambition for premier status?

No matter how passionately such ambition is stated, the words are usually empty, according to Brad Glosserman. His book *Peak Japan: The End of Great Ambitions* went into print in 2019, before the coronavirus pandemic. As I turned the pages of in the summer of 2020, I wondered if the reaction to the coronavirus crisis will be any different to responses to previous disasters, such as the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. If the historical precedent cited by Professor Glosserman is followed, this would appear unlikely. Glosserman is frustrated that no matter how serious Japan's problems, they do not provide the impetus for social transformation. Shocks trigger a temporary sense of alarm but 'this is not sufficient to

move Japanese people out of their comfort zone and to change the direction from business as usual' (p. 5).

Professor Glosserman is an American scholar and, in my view, retains a high regard for free market capitalism, strong alliances between liberal democracies and a business environment which fosters innovation and entrepreneurship. He also understands Japan deeply, having been a resident and regular visitor since 1991. He worked as a journalist for *The Japan Times* and as an analyst for a think tank called the Pacific Forum. His book is thoroughly researched and engaging.

Rather than finger pointing, he makes a special effort to explain how the Japanese interpret their national dilemma and how they proffer solutions. Occasionally, there are charming suggestions. The novelist Shimazai Tomaki expresses a wish to see the government establish a network of neighbourhood cafes, where people could go to get to know one another 'even if they don't necessarily chat or become close friends, although it would obviously be great if they did' (p. 159).

Fun ideas such as chat cafes are rare, for this is a serious book which records a mood which is predominantly gloomy. Glosserman cites numerous opinion polls which suggest that for much of the time since the bubble economy burst in the 1990s, Japanese people have been dissatisfied with their country's political and economic performance. The frustration is acknowledged by both the left and right. This book contains many interviews with people who long for reform but who are dismayed that so many bold plans for action end up going nowhere.

The author provides a striking example from the turn of the millennium, when Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo established a commission on Japan's Goals for the 21st Century. Committees made up of academics, journalists and policy specialists from across the political spectrum shared ideas. Their report stated that in the year 2000, Japan stood at a turning point in its history, as significant as the Meiji Restoration and its defeat in World War II. The experts concluded that there was an urgent need to redefine the social contract between individuals and society. They even offered many specific and practical suggestions on how to do this, few of which were followed.

Despite the good intentions, Professor Glosserman claims that by the early 2000s, there was 'a rapid exacerbation of private suffering directly related to economic hardship' (p. 19) in Japan, including record rates of unemployment, homelessness, child

abuse and suicide. Further traumas have followed since then.

We are left with a puzzle. As the author notes, Japan is a country which has repeatedly proven able to rise to challenges and overcome them. So why does it struggle to deal with what seem to be relatively minor problems, such as ending deflation or stemming the decline in the birth rate?

The book's author takes the view that part of the difficulty is that changes advocated from the top take ages to implement, or never catch on at all. The so-called third arrow of Abenomics is a classic example of this: a shot at reform which appears to have missed its target. Professor Glosserman notes that under Japan's political system, prime ministers have limited ability to set the legislative agenda, so their plans often fail to make it through fractious parliamentary committees, or are deliberately obstructed by a self-serving bureaucracy. The author warns that Abe Shinzo's current term in office is 'a last gasp' which will be 'frustrated by a combination of structural restraints and attitudinal barriers' (p. 236).

Professor Glosserman sees a country 'with a relative dearth of entrepreneurial activity, especially among the young' (p. 221). He implies that the majority of Japanese young people are complacent and compare unfavourably to the dynamic Chinese. In evidence, he offers the words of a Kyoto University student who told him: 'We are happy and comfortable. We can sleep on trains and no one will steal our money. We don't feel a sense of urgency or pain and so we are not desperate to try something new' (p. 231).

The debate about reform, rebirth and rejuvenation continues. For example, the *Nikkei Asian Review* ran an op-ed on April 30th 2020 under the headline 'Coronavirus gives Japan Inc [the] push it needs for radical reform'. In it, the writer Jochen Legewie – Tokyo partner and Asia Chairman of strategic communications consultancy Kekst CNC – claimed that as a result of the coronavirus crisis, 'transformation and restructuring are sure to take place at a level many cannot yet imagine' and added that 'this change will be most profound in Japan'.

The *Nikkei* piece noted that previous external shocks have not prompted long-lasting change. That suggests to me that Professor Glosserman is probably right to conclude that most Japanese citizens lack a passion for the urgent reforms to match their leaders' great ambitions. §

Kimono Couture: The Beauty of Chiso

by Vivian Li and Christine Starkman

D Giles Ltd (2020)

ISBN-13: 978-1911282662

Review by Carolin Becke



Being widely regarded as Japan's national dress, kimono have attracted the attention of both domestic and overseas audiences at various points in time. Particularly the opening of the ports of Japan to foreign trade in the 1860s brought about the Japonisme craze, with kimono, among other pieces of Japanese arts and crafts, being exhibited at events around the globe, inspiring a new audience outside the borders of Japan. With the Tokyo Olympics being held in 2021, there once again seems to be a heightened interest in the garment of late, with major exhibitions, such as the Victoria and Albert Museum's *Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk*, aiming to re-tell the story of kimono. The Worcester Art Museum's *Kimono Couture: The Beauty of Chiso* is the latest addition to this line-up, bringing in a fresh view by exploring the contemporary art practices behind kimono. The exhibition had to be re-scheduled to later in the year, but the accompanying catalogue is now available.

Kimono Couture: The Beauty of Chiso mainly focuses on the crafting practices behind kimono, telling the history of kimono from the view of one of Japan's oldest kimono houses still existing today, Chiso. Chiso was founded in 1555 as a trading company specialising in Buddhist vestments / robes by Nishimura Sengiriya Yozaemon, and later became a key supplier of decorated textiles and kimono to the imperial household. It was particularly Chiso's signature *yuzen* paste-resist dyeing technique, making each item appear delicately hand painted, which caught the attention of both members of the imperial household as well as fashionable individuals. During the Meiji period, the company started collaborating with *nihonga* (Japanese-style painting) artists to create new designs and patterns, benefitting both the company as well as guaranteeing the continued appreciation of labour- and time-intense techniques and skills. Even today, Chiso remains committed to their vast network of 600 artisans, aiming to assist weavers and dyers in their survival by venturing into new, previously unexplored territories. Following this line, the collaboration with an art institution like the Worcester Art Museum was a first for Chiso, and

resulted in the commission of a wedding kimono specifically designed for the Worcester Art Museum.

A particular highlight of the catalogue is consequently the interview with Chiso's senior designer Imai Atsuhiro, providing readers with a detailed insight into the creative process behind the commissioned kimono. Imai visited Worcester in 2019 and got inspired by one of the suggested themes for the kimono's design, the 'Seven Hills' of Worcester: 'The rich nature surrounding us became an inspiration for the designs, motifs, colours, and so forth. People have always looked to nature for inspiration, and that is no different with kimono design' (p. 47). To capture nature with its seasonal changes, Imai designed an abstract, all-over pattern based on octagonal shapes which represent maple leaves and also refers to the Chiso brand's trademark. It was additionally the number seven which served as an inspiration, with the design incorporating seven gradations of colours, as well as seven different dying and embroidery techniques. Imai was also highly aware of the characteristic of kimono as both a piece of art and a material garment which is meant to be placed on the body: 'The kimono is sumptuous when its spread out; it has a different beauty when it's worn. In this kimono the two halves of an octagon come together to form one octagon at the front [when it's worn]. One half represents Chiso, the other half represents Worcester – it expresses a bond between the two places' (p. 49).



Chiso Co., Ltd, *Uchikake with Palace Garden Design*, Made for Iida Taka, the thirteenth, Madame Nishimura, 1913, *Yuzen*-dyeing and embroidery on woven silk

This bond can be felt through the catalogue, which is itself a brilliant resource for anyone interested in kimono. Presenting informative background information to the exhibition, it features 84 images which, besides depicting the fourteen Chiso kimono displayed in the exhibition, provide a visual insight into the design process; a variety of sketches and photographs depicting the process of creating the kimono, as well as close-ups of the designs and patterns all illustrate the design process as discussed in Imai's interview. I additionally personally very much appreciated the inclusion of photographs of Iida Taka, Nishimura Tokoku and Kawakami Masako, some of the women of the Nishimura household, wearing their commissioned kimono to once again illustrate the importance of kimono not just as a piece of art, but also wearable clothing. Besides these visual materials, the catalogue includes a number of informative essays, such as a discussion by Viviane Li and Christine D. Starkman's, the two curators behind the exhibition, on the role of kimono in contemporary Japan, as well as articles by Japanese art and textile experts Ryo Kikuchi and Yukio Lippit which further delve into the world of Japanese textiles.

Overall, the catalogue to the Worcester Art Museum *Kimono Couture: The Beauty of Chiso* adds to the current discussion on kimono by narrating it not as purely as a traditional costume, but as a



Chiso Co., Ltd, *Furisode with Wave and Crane Design*, Made for Nishimura Tokoku, the fourteenth Madame Nishimura, 1938, *Yūzen*-dyeing and embroidery on woven silk

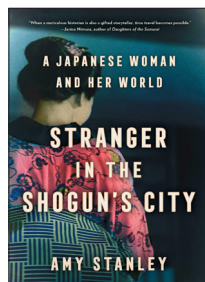
fashionable and diverse garment which had to overcome many obstacles and adapt to different historical circumstances in a variety of ways. The overall presentation within the exhibition catalogue is both inspirational and educational, and should therefore be added to the personal library of anyone with an interest in textiles, art and crafts. [S](#)

Stranger in the Shogun's City

by Amy Stanley

Chatto & Windus (2020)
ISBN-13: 978-1784742300

Review by Laurence Green



How to measure the value of one seemingly unimportant life? This is the question asked by Amy Stanley in a book that very much sees the lives of cities as inextricably linked to their inhabitants. Popularist histories are no rarity these days - the likes of Simon Schama and Mary Beard have thrilled many with the accessibility afforded by their peeling back the veneers of the past to unveil the messy, gritty reality of days gone by. So in this sense, Stanley's decision to free her study of nineteenth century Tokyo (Edo) from the dryness of a more straight-up academic tome feels like a wise one; instead she uses archival work as a foundation to then paint in a more fully realised narrative world around it.

A graduate of Harvard and now an associate professor at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, Stanley's scholarship is impeccable (indeed, the references here run to fifteen pages in length). But a book of this nature requires something more, and in a field littered with countless histories of Japan, what marks her particular tale out is that it fights, tooth and nail, to reclaim the lives of the 'little people' from historical oblivion. Instead of the great men - the politicians, the generals, the deal-makers - we are given one woman: Tsuneno.

From her origins in Japan's countryside to her life as part of the hustle and bustle of Edo, we are offered a glimpse of Tsuneno's constant struggles in the face of adversity. These are often practical and financial in nature - how to survive amidst squalour, poverty and a succession of difficult jobs. But they are also deeply personal; Tsuneno goes through three ill-fated marriages, and through the letters she writes and the notably modern, feminist lens that Stanley's study takes, we are given a flavour of the almost

incomprehensible weight of societal pressure women in nineteenth century Japan had to contend with. This strong feminist angle - re-orienting us toward areas that would simply be overlooked in other histories - is refreshing in its newness and enthusiasm, though its desire to assess a world some two-hundred years in the past by the values of today often throws up glaring tonal inconsistencies; something the author readily acknowledges as a difficult exercise.

Tsuneno is a hard character to like. We are told again and again of her rebellious, discontented nature; her constant dissatisfaction with the world around her. Her journey is constantly in motion, always moving toward a goal of betterment that, unfortunately, never comes. Instead, she faces back-breaking poverty and a cruel, unforgiving world. Most of the letters presented from her are to her family back home in the countryside - almost all are desperate pleas for clothes and sundries. We often don't get more of her inner voice than this, and as such, while she may never feel fully realised as a dramatic character, the morsels we are given shine a light on how important it is for us to acknowledge the existence of her and countless other women like her within history. These letters are more than simply documentation - they are a paper chain that breathes energy into the lives of others orbiting around her, the seeds by which we might grow a fuller portrait of one of the world's great cities.

Seen in this way, *Stranger in the Shogun's City* succeeds far more as an outright love letter to Edo - encyclopedic in nature, stuffed to the rafters with the vast panoply of delights (and horrors) available there. From theatre to food, the countless descriptions of the city are richly atmospheric and evocative of the era. A fascinating account in chapter three tells us just how much the city depended on the complex economics of the rice market. This runs in tandem with a later description of the other kinds of commerce happening in Edo, from the humblest rag peddler to the big conglomerate-driven department stores, many of which exist to this day. The book makes the wise decision to translate terms like koku (rice bales) and ryo (gold pieces) - so frequently used in prior histories of Japan - into English, making these economic descriptions more accessible and relatable to the lay reader.

These are highlights, however, and one of the book's most frustrating faults is that for far too much of its length, it is plagued by a density to the prose that is almost overwhelming in terms of the sheer amount of information it attempts to force down the reader's throat. This is further afflicted by the meandering nature of its delivery - while the book's nine chapters chronologically map out the life of Tsuneno against the backdrop of Edo, the themes discussed sway wildly within these chapters, and they often feel like they are crying out for some clarifying sub-headings or simply some shorter, punchier paragraphs. The book ends up an uneasy halfway house - too dense to serve as a truly pleasurable popularist read, too scattershot to work as sober reference material. A far better recent attempt at the same kind of 'narrative-isation' of Japanese history was Christopher Harding's *Japan Story: In Search of a Nation, 1850 to the Present*; which felt infinitely sharper and smarter in its presentation of concise vignettes to illustrate broader historical points.

At best, Stanley's book merely muddles what could have been riveting material. And make no mistake, there are some truly beautiful passages here. An elegiac ending which casts the brevity and hardship of Tsuneno's life (as well as some of her longer lived contemporaries) against the 'opening' of Japan to the West captures the poignancy of the immense societal changes they would have seen within the span of a single generation. But these glimmers of brilliance are all too often lost amidst the informational bloat surrounding them. If the nineteenth century could have had rolling twenty-four hour news channels, they might have felt a little bit like this. At worst - the ill-judged prologue and epilogue spring to mind, which put the author themselves centre stage in their own narrative - the tone of the book feels needlessly breathless and overwritten.

There is a vital, important story to be told here. And the book's attempts to open it up to a wider audience makes it all the more admirable. But the fact remains that Tsuneno's story is heavy going - caught up in its own excitement, *Stranger in the Shogun's City* can often feel claustrophobic in its intensity, clamouring to make its message heard amidst a relentless din of background noise. But perhaps, like Edo itself, that is the whole point. [S](#)

Interested in writing for *The Japan Society Review*?

Please write to alejandra.armendariz@japansociety.org.uk with examples of your work and information about your knowledge of and interest in Japan.