

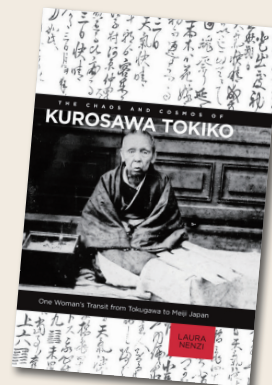
BOOK REVIEW

The Chaos and Cosmos of Kurosawa Tokiko: One Woman's Transit from Tokugawa to Meiji Japan

By Laura Nenzi

University of Hawai'i Press, 2015
ix + 265 pages.

Reviewed by G. G. ROWLEY



Biography is booming. Every week the broadsheet newspapers and literary supplements bring us word of new biographies of women we thought we knew well—Jane Austen, Anne Brontë, Cleopatra—as well as those hitherto less familiar: the “last surrealist” Leonora Carrington, the mathematicians who worked at the Harvard College Observatory in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Mussolini’s “last lover” Claretta Petacci.

Our own field has not lagged behind. Scholars have excavated the lives and explored the impact of an enormous variety of Japanese women, from Nara period emperors and sixteenth-century Christian converts to artists and poets from all periods of Japanese history. A short list limited to subjects born before 1900 would include Patricia Fister’s pioneering *Japanese Women Artists, 1600–1900* and Haruko Nawata Ward’s *Women Religious Leaders in Japan’s Christian Century, 1549–1650*; collections of biographical essays, such as Gail Lee Bernstein’s *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600–1945*, Chieko Irie Mulhern’s *Heroic with Grace: Legendary Women of Japan*, and Rebecca L. Copeland’s *Lost Leaves: Women Writers of Meiji Japan*; and monographs on individual women, such as Christina Laffin’s *Rewriting Medieval Japanese Women: Politics, Personality, and Literary Production in the Life of Nun Abutsu*, Bettina Gramlich-Oka’s *Thinking Like a Man: Tadano Makuzu*, and Anne Walthall’s *The Weak Body of a Useless Woman: Matsuo Taseko and the Meiji Restoration*.

I have enjoyed reading and learned much from these and other biographies, but I must confess to feeling a certain trepidation as I began Laura Nenzi’s life of Kurosawa Tokiko (1806–1890), the village teacher and oracle—Tokiko specialized in yin-yang divination—who became an ardent “loyalist.” As if the xenophobia of late Tokugawa loyalists is not tiresome enough (Tokiko wrote: “I never thought that / our country would be violated / by foreigners; / may I strike them / with bow and arrows,” p. 49), there is their belief in the salvific power of monarchs, a form of derangement that seems to me little different from faith in astrology or blood types, and which in 1859 caused Tokiko to decide to walk from her home village in the Mito domain to Kyoto in order to petition Emperor Kōmei to release the former daimyo of Mito, Tokugawa Nariaki (1800–1860), from domiciliary confinement. Tokiko’s petition was couched in the form of a long poem of more than 150 lines and is full of references to “my august lord” (*kashikoki kimi*), “my august country” (*mikuni*), and the realm above the clouds (*kumoi/kumo no ue*) where the court and emperor reside (pp. 70–77). Then there is the comet, visible to

the naked eye throughout the last four months of 1858, which Tokiko read as a distress signal from the heavens. And finally the Tenmangū, a.k.a. Sugawara no Michizane, who materialized in Tokiko's Kyoto prison cell and entrusted her with a "divine message" (pp. 103–107).

To enjoy this book then, one must stop wishing that Tokiko would wise up and instead give oneself up to Nenzi as she guides the reader through this radically different world. Nenzi's is not a straightforward telling of Tokiko's story—the author is with us every step of the way, explaining just what Tokiko's experiences reveal: not so much what the larger picture *is*, but what Tokiko's story *means*: "The ways in which it intersects with, and enriches, the broader narrative of the late-Tokugawa crisis, the collapse of the shogunate, and the rise of the modern state" (p. 3). At times I wished that Nenzi would step back and simply get on with the story. But this is not a popular treatment for a general audience. Her book is at least as much about the historiography as it is about Tokiko: part III, entitled "Memory, Manipulation, and Amnesia," comprises four whole chapters about Tokiko's "journey in historical memory" (p. 197), from official recognition of her dedication to the imperial cause in 1875, through her fate at the hands of twentieth-century historians, to her appearance in Funabashi Seiichi's historical novel *Hana no shōgai* (1952–1953), in 1963 selected as NHK's first televised *taiga dorama*.

Only a writer as good as Laura Nenzi could have made this biography of a nobody, who changed nothing, interesting. Throughout, the argument is clearly, beautifully, and vividly expressed. What wouldn't one give to be able to write, for example:

The past is not the exclusive domain of historians and ideologues. Novelists and cinematographers, among others, poach in the preserve of history, if not in the name of accuracy, in the name of action; if not for study, for spectacle; if not to educate, to entertain. (p. 190)

Or to note: "As any historian knows, nostalgia requires selective amnesia" (p. 197). The narrative is studded with such gems of observation.

All biographies illuminate the context of their subjects' lives, whether those lives were extraordinary or ordinary. If there is a trend in biographical writing, it is that authors no longer assume that the life is a sufficient self-explanatory unit; rather, they feel that "however singular a person's life may be, the value of examining it lies not in its uniqueness, but in its exemplariness, in how that individual's life serves as an allegory for broader issues affecting the culture as a whole."¹ This is an argument that Nenzi explicitly rejects in her conclusion: "Tokiko's story is meaningful neither for its results (arguably inconspicuous) nor for its 'exemplary' value" (p. 201). Nonetheless, she argues, it "demonstrates the advantages of looking at large historical events from the peephole of microhistory" (p. 203). Among the many lessons we learn is the one that Tokiko herself learned:

The hexagrams with which she divined the fate of her fellow villagers taught her that the universe consisted of a series of permutations of high and low, big and small, strong and weak; they told her that opposites worked in tandem, not independently. Such a view of the cosmic order was not at all incompatible with the idea that even a base-born person could rise above her station in life. If anything, it encouraged such a notion, and in doing so, inspired Tokiko to play a role that was larger than life. (p. 203)

¹ Lepore 2001, p. 133.

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