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Toshié: A Story of Village Life in Twentieth-Century Japan
(review)

Mariko Asano Tamanoi

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during World War II. Too often, such questions have been discussed in isolation from the national project. Frühstück demonstrates convincingly how international knowledge and national anxieties impacted intimate relations in modern Japan.

Toshié: A Story of Village Life in Twentieth-Century Japan. By Simon Partner. University of California Press, 2004. 210 pages. Hardcover \$50.00; softcover \$19.95.

MARIKO ASANO TAMANOI
University of California, Los Angeles

Publishers of academic books often indicate the scholarly fields under which the book might be listed. The publisher of *Toshié: A Story of Village Life in Twentieth-Century Japan* describes it as pertinent to “history,” “Asian studies,” and “gender studies.” The book might also be categorized as relevant to the fields of “oral history,” “modernization studies” (although nowhere in the book will the reader find the word “modernization”), and “village studies.” And yet *Toshié* defies the boundaries of all these established fields of the humanities and social sciences. The fluid boundaries of *Toshié* as an academic work parallel Simon Partner’s characterization of the life of the woman whose name provides the title for his book. Her story resonates in many ways with the larger, established narratives of the twentieth century, but also departs from them. Of course, Partner is interested in qualifying some of these established narratives and in correcting their problematic aspects. He does not stop there, however. By cross-referencing the accepted narratives of the history of rural Japan and the life history of Toshié, he aims to clarify her and her family members’ roles as agents of history. For a person like myself, who grew up in Japan and has studied rural Japan as an anthropologist, Partner’s account of Toshié’s life history has a compelling familiarity.

Sakaue Toshié was born in 1925, at a time “when two out of every ten died in childbirth or infancy” (p. 1), into a family of tenant farmers and day laborers. Indeed, as a child, Toshié lost two younger brothers to sickness. She still lives in the place she was born, Kosugi hamlet in the village of Yokogoshi, Niigata prefecture. The youngest of the four children of Kurakichi and Tsugino, Toshié was preceded in birth by her brothers Rikichi (then age twelve) and Takeharu (age five) and her sister, Kiyomi (age eight). Sakaue is the family name of Toshié’s mother, Tsugino; both Tsugino and her mother (Toshié’s grandmother) married men who thereupon were adopted into the Sakaue family. The book follows the extraordinary transformations of the Sakaue family, the village of Yokogoshi, and Japan, in a century of dramatic change.

In addition to the preface, where Partner lays out the main themes of the book, and the conclusion, the book has five chapters arranged in roughly chronological order: “On the Banks of the Agano,” “The Making of a Japanese Citizen,” “The Village Goes to War,” “Rural Life Under the Occupation,” and “Red Carpets and Whisky.” In the 1920s, the farmers of Yokogoshi led lives of “hard labor without chains” (chapter 1). In the 1970s, the same farmers became fully fledged members of mass consumer society (chapter 5). In the intervening chapters, Partner takes up the transformation of the farmers’ work habits (from communal to individual labor) and the integration of the village economy into the national cash economy. He also discusses the effects of the

Great Depression on the lives of Yokogoshi farmers, the decline of the silk industry, the mobilization of the resources of Yokogoshi—human and otherwise—for the Japan-China War and the Pacific War, the impact of postwar education reforms, and the improvement of hygienic conditions. Other events that Partner addresses are more specific to Yokogoshi. They include tenant disputes in the 1920s and 1930s, the effects of land reform in Yokogoshi during the Occupation (1945–1952), as well as the transformation of the Itō family from one of the greatest landowning families in Japan to a museum owner. In the last instance, Itō Bunkichi, who lost close to two thousand hectares of land as a result of the land reform, by taking advantage of the postwar economic chaos was able to purchase a large number of art objects to create his museum collection. While the changes experienced by the Sakaue family, the village, and Japan are indeed extraordinary, it is wrong, Partner warns, to perceive these changes in terms of an uncritical “before the war” and “after the war” scheme. Toshié’s father, Kurakichi, who died in 1952, experienced “a lifetime of harsh labor, periods of near-desperate poverty, the death of both sons [in the Japan-China War and the Pacific War], a mentally ill daughter with no hope of treatment, a government that took far more than it gave, the slow sale of land, and the decline into indebtedness” (pp. 125–26). Although Toshié has greatly benefited from the products of a consumer society, she, too, had to struggle with inadequate land, hard daily labor, and low wages until the early 1970s. Thus, it was not until the 1980s and 1990s that Toshié finally began enjoying the fruits of her own hard labor.

These changes did not simply descend from above. We should not lose sight of the roles played by individual agency as in the case of Toshié. It is she who learned the affairs of the Japanese empire at school. And it is she who continues to make choices in the mass consumer society. Partner structures his book like a spiral, a spiral that grows wider as it rises. At the bottom center of the spiral, he places Toshié. Near this bottom center, he situates her immediate and extended families. Not all of them have always lived in Yokogoshi, largely because such families as the Sakaue had to “decrease the number of mouths to be fed” (*kuchiberashi*). Toshié’s oldest brother, Rikichi, left the village at age twelve to work as a hired hand on a nearby farm, while her sister, Kiyomi, was sent to Niigata as a child minder and maid at age ten. Having renounced his rights to the property of the Sakaue family, an uncle led the life of a vagabond until 1931 when he, now penniless, returned to Kosugi. Toshié’s other brother, Takeharu, left for Tokyo at the age of fourteen to become an apprentice in a clothes shop. Toshié, too, was apprenticed to the Yamazaki family, who lived three miles to the east of Kosugi. As Partner goes up the spiral, he introduces the reader to the major events of Japanese rural history. The historians of rural Japan are certainly familiar with them. Yet, in Partner’s account, the key events of the history of rural Japan take on a new vividness, for the reader is able to connect them to the everyday life of the Sakaue family. The wars fought in China or in the Pacific are thus not merely distant, historical footnotes, but deeply personal events that killed both of Toshié’s brothers. The pensions that Toshié’s mother received for the deaths of her sons were not simply sums of money; they greatly helped Toshié’s household economy.

Partner seems to have been blessed with an excellent research environment. Yokogoshi, which became a “town” in 1995, was one of the villages that were thoroughly researched by a team of scholars from the American Occupation forces. At the time of Partner’s fieldwork in the 1990s, a dedicated town historian, Mr. Fukuda Hitoshi, was working on the first volume of the town’s history, and Partner was able

to benefit in various ways from Mr. Fukuda's assistance. Most importantly, Partner met Toshié, a wonderful storyteller, willing to share her fund of warm and heartrending memories. Partner does not discuss "memory" in and of itself. Rather, he approaches Toshié's memories as an archive. Instead of transcribing her words in her own voice, as most anthropologists try to do, the author largely recounts Toshié's memories for us. While I wish we could hear more of her own voice, Partner's respect for Toshié's memories makes this book one of the best and most readable studies of twentieth-century rural Japan available. Toshié has two daughters: Keiko, whom she and her husband adopted, and Ayako, their natural daughter. The book ends with Partner's brief descriptions of the families of Keiko and Ayako. This time, again, Ayako adopted a husband (*muko*) into the Sakaue family. What will Ayako's life be like? It would be wonderful if someone, if not Partner, were able to follow her life and write another book on rural Japan in the twenty-first century.

Practicing the Afterlife: Perspectives from Japan. Edited by Susanne Formanek and William LaFleur. Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2004. 536 pages. Softcover €69.78.

Bereavement and Consolation: Testimonies from Tokugawa Japan. By Harold Bolitho. Yale University Press, 2003. 226 pages. Hardcover \$35.00.

FABIO RAMBELLI
Sapporo University

One of the main topics in the pseudoacademic field known as *nihonjinron* (discourses on the Japanese) is the Japanese view of the other world and the afterlife. Many treatments of the subject mix together Ainu and Ryukyu "traditional" cosmologies (investigated after modernization/colonization and thus on the verge of vanishing), folklore of remote areas in the Japanese mainland, and myths from ancient texts in an attempt to show that Japanese people have a distinctive and remarkably stable vision of the other world—something that sets them aside from other ethnic groups and at the same time signals a supposedly continuous spiritual communality. The proponents of this perspective argue that for the Japanese the dead live on mountains or beyond the sea and come back periodically to visit their descendants. As ancestors, the dead reward the good endeavors of their kin and punish their bad behavior. This vision supposedly does not require a formal religious cult; everything is taken care of within the family and the village community in the framework of a natural and spontaneous interaction with the sacred—without the influence of foreign religions such as Buddhism or interventions of the state and other political institutions. In other words, in *nihonjinron* literature, existence is configured as a tight community of the living and the dead intent on preserving spiritual values traditionally associated with the core elements of Japanese civilization. Echoes of this vision can frequently be found in mass-media treatments of Japan, from newspaper articles to anime, both in Japan and abroad.

These circumstances suggest that the discourse of the afterlife in Japan is a highly ideological pursuit. A sizable number of readers would seem to find its romanticized views pleasant and reassuring, but few of its claims rest on solid historical and empirical foundations. Anyone who has been in Japan for a while knows that virtually no