

BOOK REVIEWS/JAPAN

Ian Neary. *Soeda and the Making of Modern Japan: Power, Religion and Industry in Northern Kyushu*. Amsterdam University Press, 2025. 246 pages. Hardcover, \$120.00; eBook, \$49.59.

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This book is about the thousand-year history of one small town in Kyushu. It is history from the bottom up. Ian Neary focuses on issues where “national trends intersect with municipal concerns” (14). The town is also affected by international events, most importantly the coming of war in the twentieth century. There are two things that make the history of Soeda distinct from other similar-sized towns in Japan: the Mount Hiko monastic community and the coal mining industry. Their rise and fall are the focus of much of this book. It is a town that the author knows very well, having first visited it in 1973. He combines this intimate firsthand knowledge with a scholarly expertise built up over a lifetime to produce a book that helps the reader understand more deeply the history of Japan based on the experiences of communities that can be overlooked by more traditional approaches. The book is divided into nine chapters and an epilogue, which tell the story of Soeda and the surrounding area in chronological order from the Jomon period up to the present day.

The town of Soeda can be found in the southeast corner of Fukuoka Prefecture near the border with Oita Prefecture. The valley in which it is located is dominated by Mount Hiko. A Buddhist temple founded on this mountain became “the most important Shugendō community in Kyushu” (27). Neary provides a useful account of how Shugendō emerged as a Japanese folk religion, absorbing various religious influences from abroad during the ninth and tenth centuries. By the fifteenth century, there may have been as many as 3,800 monks living on the mountain. Neary goes into detail outlining the forms and functions of the various parts of this complex community. The key organizational unit was the *bōke*, a small household headed by a priest. Neary estimates that between the 1690s and the 1860s there were about 250 of them. Priests and their disciples in the Shugendō religious tradition were known as *yamabushi*, and their connection with Mount Hiko became so renowned that in 1988 a statue of a *yamabushi* wearing their distinctive clothes and carrying their famous conch shell (the sound of which could blind evil spirits) was erected in front of Soeda railway station.

The events leading up to and following the Meiji Restoration were to be calamitous for the monastic community on Mount Hiko: “The community was divided between the radical imperial patriots and a more prudent faction who were loyal to the Bakufu” (62). Neary provides a fascinating case study of what the separation of Buddhism and Shinto (*shinbetsu bunri*) meant for those whose loyalties were torn. At first, the abbot (*zasu*) simply promoted a policy of “separation” with care being taken not to damage valuable Buddhist images and bells when they were removed. But as the campaign against Buddhism at the national level became more aggressive in the 1870s, any artifacts connected with Buddhism were not just removed, they were destroyed. The Mount Hiko community never recovered from this.

Neary is also adept at using Soeda and its surroundings as a case study of political modernization during the Meiji era. Legislation brought into being a system of elected municipal assemblies, although the voters were divided into two ranks based on how much tax they paid. There was thus a continuation of power relations at the local level: “Although superficially democratic, the criteria for candidates and organization of the voting process were so highly restricted and complex that they resulted in preserving the existing hierarchies within rural communities” (96). Neary suggests that “local government, although nominally subject to democratic systems, was mainly a way to persuade citizens to identify with the state’s aims rather than to allow them to influence its content” (101). The new conscript army and national school system served similar functions.

Chapter 5 is devoted to the development of the coal mining industry in Soeda and the surrounding area, the rise and fall of which would come to dominate the town’s fortunes. Neary’s account of coal mining in the pre-industrial period is fascinating. Coal production was limited by the primitive state of the mines and the lack of adequate transportation. Only those facing abject poverty would actually work in the mines (114). Modernization came to Soeda’s coal mines due to the importance placed on the mining industry by the Meiji regime. In an effort to both reduce the power of the former daimyo and prevent foreign colonial control of vital resources, the central government separated the ownership of land from control of the resources beneath it and banned foreign ownership (115). Anyone wanting to build a mine would have to buy a lease from the government. This brought about a chaotic period when hundreds of very small mines were established. Inevitably, many mining companies failed, and a small number of large companies came to dominate the industry. In Soeda, the pre-industrial problem of inadequate transport was solved in 1903 by the creation of rail links to coastal ports. One family came to dominate the industry in the region: the Kurauchi family, a wealthy farming family that started off with one small mine and slowly acquired others. In 1916, the Kurauchi Kōgyō Kabushiki Kaisha was established, and over the

next two decades it came to dominate not only the economy of Soeda but also its politics and cultural life. In 1939, the company sold all of its mines to the Furukawa zaibatsu.¹

Neary paints a vivid picture of the lives of the miners and their families in Soeda. Instead of being paid in cash, they were paid in coupons that could only be exchanged for goods at the company store. Despite the dangers of coal mining, the population of the town increased as many workers decided that as harsh as conditions were, they were better than working in the fields. Attempts by miners to form unions were successfully opposed by company managers (129).

Neary's account of Soeda during the war years, the subject of chapter 6, is fascinating because of the surprising *lack* of impact of the war on the local community and the absence of lasting impressions. Soeda is fortunate for being too remote and rural to have been of interest to American bombers. It is highly ironic, therefore, that the only large explosion that takes place in the town is accidental and happens *after* the war is over!

One temporary impact of the war was the arrival of Koreans and prisoners of war (POWs) to work in the mines. Koreans had worked in the mines before the war, some of them as seasonal workers. But as the demands of Japan's wartime economy grew, Koreans were brought into the mines via an evolving policy of "forced migration" (143). They were usually given the most dangerous jobs and were sometimes treated brutally. But in the name of balance, Neary adds that revisionists have claimed Korean workers were not really "forced laborers" (except in the final year of the war) because they were free to go home after completing their contracts. Almost all of the Korean miners in Japan went home as soon as the war ended, a fact that makes it hard to build a case that they were a satisfied workforce.

For readers used to stories of the inhumane treatment of POWs in the hands of the Japanese, Neary's account of their experience in wartime Soeda may come as a surprise. Between 1943 and 1945, over 700 POWs from Holland, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia were housed in a local camp. This was, effectively, "the largest group of Westerners ever to live in Soeda" (147). Most of them were put to work in the mines. They suffered cruel treatment by camp supervisors, from an inadequate diet, and harsh working conditions. However, out of 702 POWs only twelve had died by the war's end—seven through illness and five through pit accidents (159). With yet another ironic twist of fate, further deaths occurred after the war was over when two men were killed by a food canister dropped from an American

¹ Zaibatsu were business conglomerates in which individual firms were closely linked together through personal relationships and shared access to capital and technology. After World War II, they were transformed into keiretsu, which were similar in most important respects but in which banks played a greater role.

plane and others died from overindulgence of strong alcohol. Neary finishes this section concluding that conditions in Soeda were better than in most other POW camps. Research like this can only enrich a proper historical accounting of the experiences of POWs in Japanese camps.

Chapter 7 is about the Occupation and shows how Soeda, like much of the rest of Japan, experienced continuities as well as change. One beneficial change was land reform, which created new opportunities for former tenant farmers to own land. On the other hand, the Furukawa company was allowed to continue its ownership of the coal mines. A senior member of the company who had attended Harvard before the war used his American contacts to mitigate the impact of Occupation reforms (175). Although US policy in the early years of the occupation aimed at breaking up the zaibatsu, the Furukawa company, which was regarded as a “second tier” zaibatsu, was preserved more or less intact. It subsequently grew and evolved into a successful postwar keiretsu and remained the largest employer in Soeda.

Like coal mining communities in other advanced industrial nations, Soeda had to face the fact that the pits would one day have to close. The town’s population reached its postwar peak in 1955. The rest of Japan was booming, so it was not difficult for laid-off miners to find work if they were willing to move. Municipal leaders devised a series of plans, but none of them did much to stem the flow of people out of the town or attract others to come. One idea, which at the time of writing seems to be enjoying modest success, is a revival of interest in both the religious practice and history of Mount Hiko. In another ironic twist of fate, it may be the area’s medieval history that saves it from complete obliteration by the forces of deindustrialization.

Neary effectively combines intimate local knowledge with a strong familiarity with historical, political, and sociological scholarship more traditionally focused on national trends and events to produce a narrative that tells the story of Japan over a thousand-year period from the point of view of one small geographical area. The text is supplemented by diagrams and illustrations, some drawn by Neary’s wife, Suzuko Anai, and others by an Allied POW. These help the reader visualize the events portrayed in the narrative. I highly recommend this book, which will be of value to anyone interested in local history in Japan, as well as those concerned with Japan’s national story, especially the Shugendō religious tradition, the coal mining industry, and the wartime experiences of Korean workers and POWs.

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