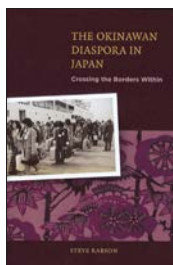


Japan



Steve Rabson, *The Okinawan Diaspora in Japan: Crossing the Borders Within*

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012. 328 pages. Cloth, US\$55.00. ISBN 978-0-8248-3534-7.

THE GROWING field of Okinawan studies has been a welcome addition to research on Asia. Okinawa presents scholars with important case studies in minority relations, labor migration, colonial and postcolonial cultures, transnational movements of people, cultural practices of resistance, diasporic settlements and resettlements, and military encampments amid global tensions. Steve Rabson's new book, *The Okinawan Diaspora in Japan*, adds an important contribution to this mix. Through archival research, literature, surveys, and interviews, Rabson paints a rich and complex portrait of Okinawan immigrants within Japan's shores ("mainland Japan"), specifically in the Osaka area where the majority have settled through work and social ties. Because of Okinawa's twentieth-century economic conditions, it has become notable for its out-migration in the form of *dekasegi* (long-distance work). Okinawans have traveled and settled far (Hawai'i, the Americas, other parts of Asia) and near (other parts of Japan) in search of work. Rabson's contribution lies in documenting the domestic out-migrating Okinawan population who have heretofore been neglected in the literature. His contribution also lies in providing us historical details of yet another minority group in Japan. Okinawans—alongside Ainu, Burakumin (former outcaste), resident Koreans, resident Chinese, Southeast Asians, returning Nikkei (persons of Japanese ancestry)—challenge prevailing attitudes invested in a mythical sense of Japanese homogeneity. In spite of the fads in popular culture that might place resident minority populations in a favorable light (for example, the "Okinawa boom" of late 1980s and early 1990s, the "Korean boom" of the late 1990s and the early twenty-first century), multiculturalism in contemporary Japan remains a buzzword that has yet to overcome everyday discrimination.

Chapter 1 begins with prehistory and the establishment of a Ryukyuan kingdom in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries ("Golden Age"), followed by the incorporation of Okinawa as a prefecture of Japan in 1879. Chapters two and three move to the economic decline that prompted early twentieth-century immigration to the Osaka area, followed by wartime atrocities in Okinawa (chapter 4). Finally, chapters five and six discuss the complexities of postwar relations between generations of Okinawans in "mainland Japan" amid continuing controversies surrounding United States military bases. Okinawa's story—whether in the Ryukyus or in Osaka—is not an easy one to tell, and Rabson does a credible job of interspersing diasporic voices with those from the home prefecture, within the context of official government policies of migration and assimilation. He provides the critical history allowing us to interpret the different opinions and practices in the diaspora. Who is Okinawan, when, how, and to what

purpose? The answers often fall along generational lines: earlier generations adhere to assimilationist pressures; more recent immigrants seek minoritarian advocacy and rights. Interestingly, “crossing the borders within” may refer both to borders within the nation-state of Japan, as well as borders within a minority population that struggles with identity issues.

I have a few criticisms of Rabson’s important volume. The first concerns the role of gender in discussing immigration and the diasporic populations. Rabson pays scant attention to the different gendered nature of Okinawan experiences in mainland Japan, and although he makes clear when women or men traveled outside of Okinawa and for what reasons, he does not analyze the role that gender may have played in the experience itself. The kinds of *dekasegi* work and living conditions that Okinawans undertook were often highly structured by gender—for example, men in construction or other heavy labor; women in manufacturing and living in tightly controlled company dormitories—and these very conditions may have well contributed to the structuring of the diasporic Okinawan community.

Second, what rates and forms of intermarriage characterize this immigrant community? Rabson provides only one paragraph on mixed marriages, but this changing demographic has potentially far-reaching impacts that are not fully explored. If intermarriage between Okinawans and Japanese (or with other minorities) has played varying roles historically (that is, migrants marry other Okinawans; the second generation predominantly outmarry), then this shifting practice may create conflicts, especially surrounding identity. A younger generation of mixed parentage Okinawans poses new issues of identity and community for the group.

The final chapter, a discussion of other minorities in Japan, reads too much like an afterthought, rather than an integrative part of the work as a whole. In this last chapter, we read in varying detail about Burakumin (2 pages), resident Koreans (16 pages), resident Chinese (5 pages), Ainu (5 and 1/2 pages), and Nikkei (4 pages). I provide comparative page lengths to illustrate the uneven nature of the coverage of each community. What would have strengthened this final chapter is either greater integration of the theme of crossing borders within, or more consistent comparison with Okinawans. To what degree do minorities in Japan band together? To what extent are they purposely divided? To what extent do they call upon foreign, external sources (for example, indigenous groups’ movements) as a model for their own interaction with the Japanese government and public? The chapter may have worked better as a separate appendix.

These criticisms are not meant to detract from Rabson’s very real achievements. He has produced an important new work on a little-studied group that further dismantles any lingering notions of Japan’s putative homogeneity. We learn the historical details of an important segment of the population within Japan’s heterogeneous shores. Undoubtedly, that heterogeneity is fraught with underlying tensions within and between groups. But what Rabson imparts is the conviction that these stories speak as more than mere factoids in a mounting pile of evidence; they speak to the very definition of modern Japan.

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