

JAPAN

BESTOR, THEODORE C. *Tsukiji: The Fish Market at the Center of the World*.

A Philipp E. Lilienthal Book. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. xxviii + 411 pages. Maps, illustrations, tables, appendices, glossary, bibliography, index. Cloth US\$60.00; £39.93; ISBN 0-520-22023-4. Paper US\$24.95; £16.95; ISBN 0-520-22024-2.

Theodore C. Bestor's long awaited ethnography of the Tsukiji fish market is a remarkably detailed account of the economic trends, political constraints and incentives, consumer preferences, and complex web of social relationships that coalesce within a small geographical area—located where the Sumida River empties into Tokyo Bay. The book seeks to comprehend the “social and cultural embeddedness of economic life” (12), thereby reinvoking the formalist versus substantivist debate. What the formalist approach would identify as “inefficiencies” are here revealed as rational efforts by people involved in the market to protect their livelihoods and maintain their networks of mutual support.

Early on we are treated to a virtual tour of the market itself. Here we gain a vivid feel

for the complexity of distribution as well as the antiquated facilities that both enable and impede the movement of seafood products. Long-standing plans to reconstruct the market stalls and infrastructure on the same location faltered after the collapse of the infamous bubble economy in the early 1990s. The Tokyo Metropolitan Government has since been pushing for relocation, which would no doubt raise efficiency of distribution and also free up a coveted piece of real estate in the heart of downtown Tokyo for more lucrative development projects. The plan is staunchly opposed by most of the traders who make their living in the market, resulting in the current standoff.

The book is by no means focused solely on economic issues. One of the most engaging aspects is its presentation of food as a conspicuous form of entertainment. This is illustrated by the numerous television programs that focus on food, and the fact that tasting the local cuisine is one of the primary motivations for tourist travel. Food preferences are closely tied to regional identity, varying not only in terms of the ingredients used but also the manner in which they are prepared and served.

Bestor points out how certain foods that tend to be recognized as quintessentially Japanese have actually been borrowed from abroad or are of fairly recent origin. Sushi itself (as a sliver of raw fish served atop a bed of vinegared rice) dates only from the mid-nineteenth century. The fact that the younger generation displays less affinity for cooking has helped to promote an “eating-out boom,” which is welcome news for restaurant owners but not for retail merchants. Other changes have to do with the retail outlets themselves. To savvy customers with increasingly discriminating tastes, the personal touch and social interaction available in local neighborhood shops are succumbing to the lower prices and wider variety that the supermarkets offer.

The book also scores highly in its balanced presentation of both the “vertical integration” provided by hierarchies of authority and the “horizontal cohesion” that derives from less formal expressions of solidarity and mutual support. These two dimensions are divided into separate chapters, but there is considerable overlap between them. In the midst of it all are the intermediate wholesalers, the defining presence and key players within the market milieu.

Anthropologists of Japan will find much that is familiar in this discussion of wholesalers. Most of their shops are family enterprises. Eldest sons feel compelled to succeed their fathers, marriages are arranged with other Tsukiji households, and cases of adopted sons-in-law (*muko yōshi*) abound. Branching is also prevalent, with a younger son or favored apprentice set up in a branch of the main shop. It will come as no surprise to many readers that “the fundamental issues of kinship—marriage, inheritance, succession—are inextricably linked to property, capital, and labor” (223).

In one interesting and widely practiced custom the son and designated successor is sent to apprentice with a competing wholesaler before eventually returning to take over his father’s shop. This allows him to learn his trade under an experienced mentor while avoiding potentially divisive friction with his own father. From the perspective of the market as a whole, however, it also fosters a sense of mutual trust and respect among competing households. Master-apprentice relationships thus come to resemble marriage and adoption as forms of alliance.

“Horizontal” devices like customary auction procedures and internal appeals panels demonstrate that the market is largely self-regulating. Their purpose is to level inequalities deriving from location and economies of scale. Supermarkets want earlier deliveries, for example, while small retailers want to limit supermarkets’ power. The solution is *sakidori* (“taking before”), whereby supermarkets are allowed to take away their purchases before the auction begins, but must pay for the privilege by meeting the top price as determined

by the day's bidding. Since buyers are only allowed visual inspections of the fish before buying, the appeals panels redress grievances arising from hidden dangers, like internal parasites or blemishes, that would otherwise result in lost profit. "Throughout the auction system, institutionalized devices spread risk or equalize slight differentials in power" (258).

Readers of this journal may be particularly interested in the illuminating bits of folklore that embellish the text. Examples range from the derivation of shop names to the phrases of perpetual indebtedness that pepper the daily conversations of market players. Some provide interesting insights into the cultural assumptions underlying food preferences—the obsession with unblemished fruit, for instance. Others are of a folk religious nature, such as rites to ensure the safety of fishing crews at sea, or to propitiate the deities that control the availability of marine creatures as food. At times these apparent embellishments create meaningful analogies with the more central topic. For example, Bestor describes the rules of the children's hand game *jan-ken*, to which people so often resort when settling disputes: "rock crushes scissors, paper covers rock, scissors cut paper." Bestor expands upon this image in demonstrating that economic behavior, political institutions, and cultural proclivities are inseparably related, with none consistently dominating the others; in other words, "culture sustains institutions, institutions shape the economy, the economy recalibrates culture" (309).

The book is impressive in the scope of its coverage. It even contains elements of a travel guide by providing background on Japanese pronunciation, historical time periods, and currency exchange rates, as well as advice on when to visit Tsukiji and what to see and do there. It also provides useful insight into the development of an ethnographic research project and the realities of fieldwork, as the first chapter includes an interesting account of how the author discovered Tsukiji and became interested in the intricacies of the fish market. All in all, the reader comes away with a better appreciation for the cultural peculiarities of Japanese markets, the human dimensions of the marketplace, and the limits of a purely formalist approach to understanding market behavior.

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