

Book Review - *Tokyo Rising*

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The historical development and social trends of one of the world's most important cities comes alive in the book *Tokyo Rising: The City Since the Great Earthquake*. Edward Seidensticker, translator of many works of twentieth-century Japanese literature and author of several books on Japan, provides numerous and varied anecdotes about the history of Tokyo and its twenty-three wards. This book, published in 1990, covers the time period after the great Kantô earthquake of September 1, 1923, while the author's first book on Tokyo, *Low City, High City: Tokyo from Edo to the Earthquake*, looks at the time period between the Meiji Restoration in 1868 and the great earthquake in 1923.

Seidensticker makes clear that both of his books on Tokyo do not purport to be a political, intellectual, literary, or economic history, although they "might possibly be called social or cultural history" (Preface vii). However, many sections in *Tokyo Rising* give insights into significant events in Japanese history, such as the Pacific War, the American Occupation, and the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. Notwithstanding these insights, the book clearly does not represent an organized and analytical treatment of Tokyo's history, and the author rarely tries to provide extensive evidence or reasoning for his arguments and opinions.

The book has six chapters, which discuss approximate time periods of Tokyo's history, although the author often refers to other time periods within a chapter. The chapters consist of "The Days After" (1923-c.1926), "Happy Reconstruction Days"

(c.1926-c.1931), "Darker Days" (c.1932-1945), "The Days of the Cod and the Sweet Potato" (1945-c.1955), "Olympian Days" (c.1955-c.1965), and "Balmy Days of Late Showa" (c.1965-c.1989). The author covers such typical urban history topics as population movements, city political leadership, buildings, architecture, and transportation, but the book's more unusual subjects, such as crimes, prostitution, fine arts such as *kabuki*, popular entertainment such as baseball, visits by foreign celebrities, garbage and sewage disposal, and shopping, give the reader fascinating insights into Tokyo history that can not be readily found in other publications. The book relates the interesting, and many times humorous, histories of such items as Japanese words derived from foreign words, women's underpants, vending machines, and the custom of keeping shoes on when entering stores. Over seventy photographs enhance the reader's appreciation of Tokyo's historical events, people, and buildings.

Tokyo Rising's various anecdotes and reflections on the city's history allow the reader to gain a better understanding of several key periods in Japanese history. For example, the book's stories about governmental attempts to stamp out foreign words, lying by Japanese military authorities regarding the status of the war, the closing of most theaters, and the 1945 air raids on Tokyo illustrate the uncertainties and hardships encountered by the people of Tokyo under the militaristic regime during the Pacific War. The book relates Tokyo's difficult experiences in the postwar Occupation period with rationing, black markets, and SCAP censorship, but the author gives several examples to show the city did not lose its sense of fun and pleasure. The years leading up to the 1964 Tokyo Olympics witnessed great improvements in the city's infrastructure such as

subways and freeways, and the author illustrates how Japan and Tokyo "regained much of its self-esteem and international standing" (227).

The book's main strength lies in its many quotations from famous Japanese literary figures regarding Tokyo's people, districts, and customs. These writers provide first-hand impressions of the changes to Tokyo that they witnessed in the period after the great earthquake after 1923. The author explains that the frequency of quotations decreases toward the end of the book because "fewer memorable things seem to be said about the city as time goes by" and "Tokyo is not the subject for distinguished writing that it once was" (Preface viii, ix).

Since Seidensticker has been a resident or frequent visitor of Tokyo since 1948, his personal observations and opinions provide the reader with interesting insights, although he clearly favors the more traditional Low City (center of culture in the Meiji and Taishô Periods) over the newer High City in the western and southern part of Tokyo. As an example of the author's personal opinions, he describes the Tokyo street pattern as "warmer and cozier than Nagoya" and refers to Tokyo's "comfortable old streets" (147), even though most Tokyo residents and visitors view the streets as a crazy quilt work. The author obviously has strong opinions on some of the leisure activities he covers in the book: "Even today, looking for pursuits that keep people mindlessly happy, one might well come up with a trio— baseball, television, and *pachinko*" (192).

The most significant shortcoming of *Tokyo Rising* becomes obvious by the second page in the text. Seidensticker does not provide sufficient maps to allow the reader to understand the geographical layout of the city and the location of many of the places mentioned in the book. He provides only three maps of the Tokyo area's political

subdivisions at different time periods after 1923, but the maps fail to make clear the geographical and topographical distinctions between the Low City (*shitamachi*) and the High City (*yamanote*). The author frequently emphasizes the cultural and social distinctions between the Low City and the High City, so a reader without a detailed knowledge of Tokyo's geography needs some basic background regarding the geographical areas to which the author is referring. The maps provided by the author have several other limitations, including the following: failing to show location of the Sumida River, which the book frequently mentions; covering up several Japanese characters in the location names with black circles containing numbers; not indicating the location of such key areas as Roppongi, Ginza, Marunouchi, and Yoshiwara; and not presenting with a map the geographical difference between Tokyo city and Tokyo prefecture.

Despite the book's lack of geographical orientation, the author provides a useful description throughout the book of the continuing movement in the city's centers of activity, away from the older Low City, the cultural center of the Edo and Meiji Periods, to the newer High City toward the west and south. The "secondary centers" or "satellite cities" (*fukutoshin*) of Shinjuku, Shibuya, and Ikebukuro in the High City have grown rapidly as economic, retail, and social centers since the great earthquake of 1923, but the Low City's Ginza and Ueno have continued generally to hold their own. Moreover, even though the Tokyo prefectural government moved its offices to Shinjuku in about 1990 and a few big insurance companies have moved there, the vast majority of large companies, financial institutions, and government agencies continue to maintain their headquarters in the old center of the city, mainly in the Marunouchi area in the Chiyoda Ward.

Seidensticker provides interesting descriptions of a variety of "tribes" (*zoku*) that have existed at various times in Tokyo's history after the end of World War II. These "tribes" many times consist of rebellious youth, trend setters, or adherents to the latest fad, but a "tribe" can be any group of people with something in common. Some of the twenty or so tribes mentioned by the author relate to geographical area, such as the Roppongi Tribe and the Harajuku Tribe, and other tribes derive their names from their activities and interests, such as the motorcycle-riding Thunder Tribe (*kaminarizoku*), the amplified-music-loving Electric Tribe (*erekizoku*), and the Psychedelic Tribe (*saikezoku*), whose members put psychedelic paint over their clothes and bodies. The author (324) points out that the use of the expression "tribe" has become so broad as to include such groups as the Silver Tribe (i.e., senior citizens), named after the silver-colored seats reserved for the elderly riding on trains and buses, and the High Yen Tribe, whose members take advantage of the high value of the yen to make extravagant expenditures such as weekend trips to Honolulu.

Although some subsections of the book follow a typical chronological or topical organization, the author tends to use a stream-of-consciousness style that meanders from one topic and time period to another. These abrupt jumps may disconcert readers expecting a more conventional order. For example, one three-page subsection starts with a detailed discussion of Tokyo mass transit and then proceeds to such unrelated topics as vogueish words, unique names to periods of prosperity in Japanese history, different Japanese "tribes" (*zoku*) such as the Expense Account Tribe, the history of a neon light in Ginza between 1953 and 1983, the drug problem, tuberculosis rates, problems with domestic help, the first Tokyo supermarket, and plastic surgery (223-225).

Tokyo's population has fluctuated greatly since the great earthquake in 1923, but the book does little to explain the reasons or to show the ties to historical events, other than the sharp decrease in 1945 as a result of the many air bombings by the Allied forces. The population of Tokyo prefecture rose rapidly after 1920 (3.7 million in 1920, 4.5 million in 1925, 5.5 million in 1930, and 6 million in 1932) even though the earthquake occurred in 1923, but the author remains silent as to the reasons (93). Tokyo prefecture's population went above seven million in 1939 and stayed there through 1944, but it fell sharply to three and a half million in late 1945 (166). As Japan began its rebuilding of the large cities during the postwar Occupation, the author mentions that Tokyo's population rose rapidly by about twenty percent a year in 1946 and 1947, and it passed seven million inhabitants again in 1952 and then ten million in 1962 (167). The book does not mention any population figures after 1962 and offers no explanation for any of the growth that occurred after the end of the War. The reason for significant population fluctuations seems like an essential topic be addressed in any book that addresses a city's history.

Seidensticker usually assumes the reader has the background information necessary to understand his references to places, people, and events, so the reader without such a background will find the book hard to follow in many places. For example, although the book contains various direct quotations from such famous Japanese authors as Kafû, Kawabata, and Tanizaki, the author provides very little background on these writers and their relationship to Tokyo. A few of the anecdotes included in the book seem to have little relevance to Tokyo and its history, such as the 1975 blowfish (*fugu*) poisoning of a famous Kabuki actor (in section on post-war Japan) (208) and the trial of a would-be assassin in 1891 in Ôtsu, located near Kyoto (15-16). Periodic references to

American places divert the reader's attention and detract from understanding, such as "a stoning of the police box [is] no different linguistically from a rising in Detroit" (255), "Sanya may not be as grim as parts of Detroit" (257), and "Such harassment would not have been possible in a litigious city like New York" (235).

Some readers may question the author's treatment of women and women's issues in *Tokyo Rising*. Women tend to be analyzed in the book in only superficial, outward terms, such as dress, fashion, prostitution, performance in shows, and shopping patterns. At least one statement in the book does not seem appropriate for a serious academic writer: "Perhaps the absence of women from recent annals of crime has made the annals less interesting" (327).

The lack of background information, historical analysis, and structure in *Tokyo Rising* does not make it appropriate for students of Japanese Modern History. However, scholars of Japanese history and individuals with an excellent background in Tokyo geography and modern Japanese literature will find many valuable and interesting insights and curiosities in the book, but more documentation of sources would have enhanced the value of the book for readers seeking source material and other works on the city's history.

Works Cited

Seidensticker, Edward. Tokyo Rising: The City Since the Great Earthquake.
Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990.