



Merry White, *Coffee Life in Japan*

Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012. 240 pages.
 Paperback, \$24.95/£16.95; hardcover, \$60.00/£41.95. ISBN
 9780520271159 (paperback); 9780520259331 (hardcover).

FIND A PLEASANT place to sit for awhile, get a good cup of coffee, and read this book. That is my advice to anyone interested in Japan, consumerism, transnational influences, the history of contact between East and West, work, leisure, urban public culture, and coffee. In *Coffee Life in Japan*, Merry White turns upside down the stereotype of Japan, as a part of Asia and a country where people almost solely drink green tea, showing the interface of culture and consumption (both buying and drinking) in Japan's rise to being one of the world's three largest coffee consuming countries (with the United States and Germany).

Showing interrelationships of culture and history, the book mentions coffee in Japan by the early 1600s brought by Dutch and Portuguese traders before foreigners were expelled in the Edo era (1603–1868). It then discusses the linkage of increasing coffee consumption in Japan with urban cafes providing the time and space appropriate to drink coffee—often contrasting with appropriate places or times to drink Japanese green tea—and Japan's reopening to the Western world in the Meiji Era (1868–1912), with its introduction of Western styles, customs, and culture forming the particular pastiche of east and west that becomes the culture of Japan's modernity. Some forms of coffee begin elsewhere to get redefined and driven to new importance in Japan. An example is instant coffee, which became very popular in Japan when it was not highly regarded nor commonly used in the United States, its country of origin. In Japan instant coffee was redefined as an upscale drink appropriate to serve to important clients visiting corporate venues, to guests in general, and for gift sets for major gift-giving occasions.

The book uses coffee and its consumption as a window on contemporary Japanese culture. Japan is characterized as a culture in which collectivism and embeddedness in networks of groups is important, making “belongingness” essential, but also one in which concepts of democracy and individuality (if not strictly individual-



FIGURE 1. One of the coffee shops featured in *Coffee Life in Japan* is Otafuku, nearly hidden in the narrow shopping alleys of Kyoto except for its featured female Kabuki mask near the entrance. One can find this coffee shop and others via the book's "Visits to Cafes: An Unreliable Guide." Pictured left to right are Mr. Noda (Noda-san in the book), one of the coffee masters featured in the book, Millie Creighton, author of the book review, and Mr. Noda's assistant. Now in addition to striving for the paramount cup of coffee, Mr. Noda proudly displays a copy of the book in which he is featured above his brewing station. (Photo courtesy of author, 2013)

ism) also became important. Urban coffee shops became both places to meet others and places to avoid them. While belongingness is highly desired in Japan, the expectations of those meshes of interconnectedness can be overwhelming, making it highly desirable to sometimes step in for a cup of coffee alone as a momentary escape from the bonds of belongingness.

Japanese cultural values are also viewed through a cup of coffee, in particular *kata*, *kodawari*, and *ikigai*. *Kata* refers to "form" and involves precise ways of doing something. Esteemed coffee masters in Japan are attuned to *kata*. The Japanese word *kodawari* is difficult to capture in English. For translations White offers "disciplined dedication," "a personal passion to pursue something," and "obsession" (67). *Kodawari* can be in the product, the maker, or the atmosphere of the place in which coffee is consumed. It involves a dedicated attempt at making the paramount cup of coffee. *Kodawari* is a value-added commodity—one can charge more for something seen as having *kodawari*. However, *kodawari* is not just about making money but about putting everything into that cup of coffee and finding life's fulfillment in this. This links to *ikigai*, "reason for living." For many of the coffee masters portrayed in the book's ethnographic vignettes, dedication to making the perfect cup of coffee (or near perfect one given Japan's aesthetic values eschewing perfection and emphasizing near perfection instead) is their path to enacting life's meaning.

Gender relations are also reflected in the shadows of coffee. There are coffee drinking venues to which men and women go together, those men tend to go to alone or with other men, and those women tend to go to alone or more often with other women. Coffee locations trace the emergence of women into public space and paid working roles in Japan's history. In one discussion, family roles and gender relations are shown. Men are allowed to go to coffee shops or are perhaps even sent there by busy wives struggling to balance a paid job, domestic management, child care, and children's educational needs. This is positioned not as male privilege and dad's ability to get out of housework, but as mom's desire to get him out of the way so she can actually get the work done—something his presence impedes.

On a critical note, the author and the Japanese interviewed misrepresent *Chanoyu*, Japanese tea ceremony. Discussing highly ritualized processes of making coffee, White and her informants state that it is not like the tea ceremony, with its empty ritual, since coffee ritualization is geared towards making coffee come out its best. Anyone who has studied the Tea Ceremony long enough knows that it is not simply about ritual for its own sake. Just as the book describes for coffee, the Tea Ceremony has its own "rationality" and all of the actions performed, along with when to do them, are based on knowledge of how to get the perfect (or near perfect) bowl of *matcha* tea. (In the tea ceremony guests are served the drink in a bowl rather than cup.)

In terms of writing style it was disappointing that what is called "male biased" or "male voice" language usage seemed to predominate. This involves using "he" to stand for the average person, reader, coffee drinker, and so on, and male forms of words to designate everyone or all humanity. Such language usage is thought to subconsciously involve erasure of females while rendering females the marked category in contrast to males as the unmarked category (rendering maleness the human standard). Although these socio-linguistic issues are not as frequently at the forefront of intellectual and anthropological discussions as in preceding decades (perhaps because the point was thought to have been made), they remain important in terms of language usage and underlying gender inequality.

The book ends with a delightful section called; "Visits to Cafés: An Unreliable Guide." When you have finished reading the book—or are midway through it—use this guide to locate a special coffee shop in Tokyo or Kyoto. Once there, find a pleasant place to sit for awhile, have a good cup of coffee, and contemplate coffee life in Japan.

Millie Creighton
University of British Columbia