

Ellen Gardner Nakamura, *Practical Pursuits: Takano Chōei, Takahashi Keisaku, and Western Medicine in Nineteenth-Century Japan*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005. xiv + 236 pages.

The study of *rangaku* 蘭学 (“Dutch studies”) is a rather small field in English scholarship, focusing largely on the exchange of Western medical knowledge between Europe and Tokugawa (1600–1868) Japan. Most histories have centered on the intellectual discourse of *rangaku*, suggesting that those engaged in its study comprised a small, elite group who tried to understand principles that they often could not grasp. Within the last decade, however, several works have reevaluated the implications of Western medicine beyond this small group of intellectuals. Ellen Nakamura provides such a work in *Practical Pursuits: Takano Chōei, Takahashi Keisaku, and Western Medicine in Nineteenth-Century Japan*. Nakamura’s main point is that study of Western science was a dynamic activity that brought together

physicians from all over Japan during the nineteenth century to overcome social problems in the nation's rural and urban areas.

In making this point, Nakamura focuses upon Takano Chōei 高野長英 (1804–50), a well-known scholar of *rangaku*, and on his close relations with local doctors in the village of Nakanojō in Kōzuke (present-day Gunma Prefecture). Scholars have largely concentrated on Chōei because of his work *Bojutsu yume monogatari* 戊戌夢物語 (The tale of a dream). Chōei wrote this work after hearing about the harsh treatment of the American merchant ship *Morrison*, driven away from Japan by canon fire in 1837. In this work, Chōei openly criticized the shogunate's "shell-and-repel" policy, earning for him a reputation as more of a political activist than a physician. Nakamura moves away from this portrayal of Chōei and *rangaku* and focuses on the social networks established by Chōei and other physicians within rural communities that allowed for the spread of Western medicine outside Japan's major metropolitan areas. As Nakamura asserts, Chōei did more than simply translate books; he used the knowledge gained to solve problems facing society (p. 23).

In chapter 1, Nakamura provides a biography of Chōei and discusses the social aspect of doctors in Japan during the early nineteenth century. Chōei followed in the footsteps of his adoptive father and grandfather, becoming a physician who diligently studied Western medicine. Being from a middle-ranking samurai family, he relied heavily upon the financial assistance of others. A portion of this assistance came from three physicians from Kōzuke with whom he, in turn, shared his knowledge. Principally in this way Chōei and the physicians of Kōzuke were brought into a tight bond.

Nakamura provides readers a fairly detailed account of the social world of the Tokugawa-era physician. Her description of the physician's social environment—including medical training, various physician ranks, and methods of payment for services—allows the reader to develop a clear picture of what it was like to be a physician in the Tokugawa Period. Within this world, Chōei and his physician-associates of Kōzuke were by no means elite physicians, as they were not the personal physicians of high-ranking officials of the shogunate. However, as part of a localized elite that attempted to solve social problems, they enjoyed the respect of the local population.

The relationship between Chōei and the Kōzuke physicians is further explored in chapters 2 and 3, which together serve as the heart of Nakamura's work. Chapter 2 discusses the significance of Nakanojō as a link in the medical-social network and shows how the existing and expanding economic and social networks contributed to it. Nakamura describes Nakanojō as an ideal location for the spread and adoption of Western medicine because it possessed several thermal springs, an assortment of mountain herbs, and ready access to drugs and other commodities due to its position as a

market site and post station. In 1833, Chōei gave a series of lectures in Nakanojō based on his work *Seitsu igen sūyō* 西説医原枢要 (Fundamentals of Western medicine). Nakamura then questions (without answering) whether these factors made Nakanojō a rural center for Western learning (p. 95).

Chapter 3 examines two of Chōei's works, *Kyūkō nibutsukō* 救荒二物考 (Treatise on two things for the relief of famine) and *Hieki yōhō* 避疫要法 (Methods of avoiding epidemic diseases). She considers how these works attempted to address the problems of famine and epidemics. Set against the backdrop of the Tenpō 天保 famine (1832–38), *Kyūkō nibutsukō* discussed the planting of a special type of buckwheat and white potatoes as a means of fighting against starvation with “practical knowledge.” Nakamura suggests that this work was an attempt to get local farmers to try something new and to demonstrate the usefulness of these two crops, particularly the use of potatoes (p. 120). *Hieki yōhō* provided a hybrid of Western- and Chinese-style medicines that were designed to prevent or limit the harmful effects of disease. The work included steps in hygiene, patient care, and visits to infected patients. Nakamura asserts that these and other works were published in order to relieve the suffering of the people (p. 115). This claim insinuates that these physicians were not motivated by personal objectives but, rather, always placed the betterment of their community first. Idealistic though it may seem, Nakamura does provide material that suggests such a motive, since these physicians were apparently adopting these “practical” approaches in order to solve problems.

The last chapter focuses on one of the Kōzuke physicians, Takahashi Keisaku 高橋圭作 (1799–1875). Keisaku was a wealthy farmer who worked part time as a local country physician while maintaining other official duties within the community. Nakamura's purpose in examining Keisaku is to demonstrate how local physicians were connected to other physicians through a series of social networks that served as a means for transmitting Western knowledge. The reason for her choice of this particular person seems to be because of his extant diary that provides a rich amount of information. Nakamura uses this diary to demonstrate that Keisaku was able to maintain strong ties with other physicians in different areas by sharing books. In addition, Keisaku also had several ties through his various village duties, poetry circles, and religious and cultural activities. All of these activities allowed him to establish a strong social network that helped facilitate the exchange of Western knowledge. More importantly, Nakamura asserts that it would have been impossible for Keisaku to consider his work as a country physician separate from his other duties and roles throughout the community (p. 170). In this chapter, then, Nakamura demonstrates that a vast social network existed and that Western knowledge was indeed a topic of interest at the local level, countering previous scholarship that suggests otherwise.

Nakamura provides a solid work that demonstrates the importance of *rangaku* outside major cities, schools, and the works of famous scholars. The one small problem with this work is that Nakamura states that she intends to examine “the social impact of Western learning at the level of everyday life” (pp. 1, 175). However, her work clearly focuses on those few physicians who were generally local elites. Nakamura states that the *Kyūkō nibutsukō* and *Hieki yōhō* were aimed at wealthy farmers and physicians, and even though she insinuates that they would pass this information on to those of the community, she still does not demonstrate how Western learning was used on an everyday level among commoners. Despite this small quailm, Nakamura delivers a solid work that makes extensive use of primary sources and secondary sources in both Japanese and English. The book is also well suited as an introduction to the study of *rangaku*. Overall, this book is a gem in the small field of English scholarship on *rangaku* and will hopefully spawn future works that further illuminate the field.

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