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in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Nancy Brown Diggs. *Steel Butterflies: Japanese Women and the American Experience*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1998. vii + 204 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7914-3624-0; \$20.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7914-3623-3.

Reviewed by Sandra Katzman (Interac Co., Ltd., Independent Researcher)
Published on H-US-Japan (November, 1998)



A Close, Limited Look

This is a readable, informative book about Japanese women today from their points of view as temporary residents in the American Midwest. “How Japanese women see themselves and how they see us is what this book is all about (p. ii),” writes the American author. Nancy Brown Diggs bases her multi-faceted narrative on her questionnaire-based conversations with Japanese women. The women’s stories are woven together with supporting information from various sources. The result is a good read, although it is stilted sometimes as it moves between what the women say, how the women are described by the author, and the cited material. However, it is current and has immediacy as well as authenticity.

Diggs is opinionated in her descriptions and conclusions. I don’t know whether the opinions came after or before her research. Diggs writes: “What I learned from Japanese women living in America validates this strength [that belies their demure appearance] of the Japanese woman, which more than matches that of her American counterpart (p. ii).”

The book is organized into four parts: One, Strangers in a Strange Land; Two, Women in Japan: The Private Sphere; Three, Women in Japan: The Public Sphere; and Four, The American Experience. Based on Diggs’ interviews with Japanese women living in America, the presentation relies on glimpses of individuals. Other studies, newspaper articles, and books provide support.

I believe the women, and the secondary sources, but I am not sure of how Diggs’ viewpoints have colored her

choices of what to include from her interviews and whom to interview.

To her credit, Diggs is aware of her method’s limitation. She explains that she didn’t interview women who lived in America as they had lived in Japan: “However, since those who choose this life-style [not very different from that in Japan] are not in a position to offer the insights I was seeking, I concentrated on interviewing Japanese women whose English was good enough that they were able to participate in American life (p. iii).”

The women Diggs interviewed “were the wives of businessmen whose companies had transferred them to the Midwest, although a few were either students or the wives of students (p. iii).”

Diggs tries to go from the interviews to generalizable truths. The researcher’s method was a questionnaire “used as a starting point” (p. iv) for more open-ended sessions. She also talked with a few women in Japan.

The narrative is more than anecdotal, but less than compelling. An example of the way studies are cited: “Because of such difficulties in cultural differences, according to a survey conducted by the researcher Mary Eva Repass, half of Japanese wives living abroad suffer psychologically to some degree (p. 20).”

An example of descriptions of the women interviewed: “A trim, neat woman in her mid fifties, she is dressed sensibly in a yellow and brown skirt, yellow sweater, brown blazer, and low-heeled brown shoes.

Poised and serene, she sits erect in her chair, hands folded, as she describes how the mother in the family must provide stability (p. 34).”

The book touches on a lot of subjects pertaining to women’s social history: education, politics, the history of the women’s movements, child-rearing, social hierarchies. Diggs compares “career women in the United States” to those in Japan, concluding “American women may be ahead of Japanese women, but they are still very far behind men in this country [the United States] (p. 88).” Diggs discusses modern reforms and industrialization by parallel events in Japan and the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But she ends the chapter titled “Modern Times” with the loaded question, “how are you going to keep them in lockstep

with Japan’s structured society, after they’ve seen America (p. 107)? ” This kind of gratuitous statement rankled me as I read the book; there is enough evidence for the women to speak for themselves without this kind of forced conclusion by the author. However, the statement does tell you that the chapter has ended, and the author’s perspective.

I recommend the book as an interesting, well-researched, thoughtful work although neither conclusive nor exhaustive .

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Citation: Sandra Katzman. Review of Diggs, Nancy Brown, *Steel Butterflies: Japanese Women and the American Experience*. H-US-Japan, H-Net Reviews. November, 1998.

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