

## Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow *Our Minamata Disease*

By ISHIMURE MICHIKO

TRANSLATED BY LIVIA MONNET

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN, CENTER FOR JAPANESE STUDIES, 2003

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Reviewed by Jason R. Harshman

The study of Japanese environmental literature must begin with the work of author and reluctant activist Ishimure Michiko. This name may be unknown—and underappreciated—by many in the West due to a limited and delayed translation of Ishimure’s work outside of Japan and her unconventional approach to nonfiction writing. Ishimure first gained recognition in Japan for her determination to raise awareness regarding the onset of Minamata disease. Minamata disease is a neurological disorder that was caused by methyl-mercury poisoning of water and shellfish due to industrial pollution during the 1950s. Ishimure published “Sea of Camellias” in 1969, and in 1972 it became the first chapter of her masterpiece, *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow: Our Minamata Disease*. This immediate best-seller received the Kumamoto Nichinichi Cultural Prize in 1969, among other awards, for its lyrical quality and exposure of such a serious topic. Parts two and three—*The Shiranui Fisherman* and *What Yuki Had to Say*—were published in serial form between 1970 to 1971 and 1972 to 1973 respectively, but the collection of these works was not published in English until 1990.

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Ishimure creates a vivid picture of what life was like for villagers dealing with the political, economic, and neurological consequences of unknowingly consuming methyl-mercury during the 1950s and 60s, by integrating oral histories gathered through personal experiences as a resident of Minamata, government documents, medical reports, and newspaper reports, with various literary techniques and styles such as stream of consciousness and flashbacks.

The author challenges readers to accept that, because we possess a shared dependency on the same water and land, we must also accept that we are mutually responsible for the abuse the Earth has endured when she opines

*In our modern world of progress and civilization we have long forgotten what it means to live in keeping with the laws of nature; we have become deaf and blind to the vibrant soul of all things surrounding us. (236)*

Among the issues explored in *Paradise* are the opportunity costs residents of Minamata would have to endure if the Chisso factory, the source of the pollution, were to be shut down. Throughout the book, Ishimure addresses paradoxes with which she and her neighbors struggled and humanity has encountered since the start of mass industrialization—life and

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## Japan in World History

By JAMES L. HUFFMAN

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death, nature and technology, tradition and modernity. In chapter five, "Fish on Land," Ishimure recounts disputes between the local government and village residents over the need to increase the clean water supply, whether a villager's standard of living was to blame for their incurring the disease, and whether compensation should be paid to the afflicted. Parallels between the hardships encountered by Japanese fishermen who told Ishimure of "large, oily-looking patches of an unknown stuff, shining black, red, and blue" will call to mind the economic, ecological, and cultural disruption caused recently by the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the Shell Oil Company in Nigeria, and the Exxon-Valdez oil spill in Alaska in 1989.

Ishimure also explores the philosophical and spiritual relationship between humanity and nature and interjects tenets of Daoism and Shintoism. By also incorporating themes of reincarnation, Ishimure reminds us

*There is a living spirit in every tree, in every weed, in every blade of grass. Fish and earthworms, all living beings are endowed with a soul which stays behind and enters new life when they die. (260)*

Not only does this work suggest that our spirit remains after death, but the point that our physical impact—our carbon footprint—lasts long beyond our time on earth, blends Japanese beliefs with the physical elements of environmental studies and preservation.

Ishimure's *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow* deserves a place among pioneering works of American environmental literature such as Rachel Carson's *The Sea Around Us* (1951) and *Silent Spring* (1962), and it can provide secondary and college level instructors with a broad, yet poignant, basis on which to base an in-depth study of environmental issues, medicine, ecology, economics, law, Japanese culture and history, technology, women's studies, comparative literature, and literary criticism. Including *Paradise* in a comparative and interdisciplinary study of environmental challenges will provide students with an opportunity to develop an appreciation for how peoples and cultures around the world relate to their surroundings and our shared role as stewards of the Earth. ■

This splendidly lucid text will delight teachers and students looking for a concise, well-written, and up-to-date introduction to Japanese history. Despite the title, this new book is unlikely to be widely adopted in world civilizations courses typically dominated by texts covering many regions at once. And while it contains a respectable set of maps, black and white photos, and a timeline, the publisher has kept costs down by sacrificing color and features like primary source boxes and study questions found in more expensive texts. It is also unlikely to replace the more comprehensive treatments of modern Japan in upper division courses. For introductory courses on Japan, however, this new book is hard to beat. Reflecting trends in current scholarship, it presents a solid framework for understanding Japanese history without overwhelming the reader with extraneous details.

This text's particular strengths are its international focus, explicit use of evidence, presentation of multiple viewpoints, and its sympathetic portrayals of people in difficult circumstances. The author emphasizes, as much as possible, Japan's connections with the Asian mainland and the rest of the world. For example, the section on Japanese prehistory states, "It also seems clear, from the scores of glass beads and Korean-style daggers in the ruler's burial site, that the people of Yoshinogari were actively engaged in international trade" (9). Here we are told not only that scholars suspect important cultural interaction, but also that there is physical evidence to prove it. In a later section, the author notes,

*Evidence of local vibrancy shows up in a variety of mid-Heian records. The archives of Kozanji temple outside Kyoto, for example, have turned up letters of travelers that describe monks doubling as commercial agents, buying and selling horses for local hunters (31).*

In a brief sentence, the author gives us a glimpse not only of the commercial role of temples in local society, but also the sources that reveal this information. In its treatment of debate on modern Japanese gender roles, the text also clearly demonstrates that people did not speak with a single voice: "Writers for *Seito* and other journals debated gender issues vigorously, with traditionalists calling for a return to the good wife/wise mother ideal and progressives demanding equality and sexual freedom" (93). In a sympathetic presentation of the years leading to the Second World War, "it had become a matter of personal survival by the mid-1930s for citizens to make a show of their patriotism, to the point that even leading communists had begun announcing their conversion to nationalism" (102). When textbooks model how to evaluate sources, make nuanced conclusions, and try to understand why people in the past acted as they did, it is much easier to teach these core skills.

Teachers and students seeking a sophisticated, yet accessible, text covering the entire history of Japan should certainly consider this excellent book. ■

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