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**Review of *Koume's World: The Life and Work of a Samurai Woman Before and After the Meiji Restoration* by Simon Partner, New York: Columbia University Press, 2024. Xx + 289**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14746/sijp.2024.71.3>

Simon Partner's *Koume's World* joins a genre of microhistory using an individual life in Japanese history<sup>2</sup>. He does an excellent job illustrating what often happens to scholars who spend a lengthy period of time living in Japan, especially rural Japan or smaller cities outside of the big triumvirate of Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka. One inevitably meets local historians or history enthusiasts, sometimes through a local museum or public community center (*kōminkan*), where students, working adults, and retirees, with varying degrees of historical training, learn about some local event, people, et cetera, often through the reading and transcribing of early modern, or at least, early twentieth century documents.

Before I began graduate school, but knowing I would try to become a scholar, I took a free course at the Gumma Prefectural Museum on reading temple textbooks (*terakoya*) where participants, at least fifty of us, learned how to read handwritten documents the way that children during the Tokugawa period did, through readers used at so-called “temple schools.” Some of us progressed to a smaller reading group where we read through records kept by local domain samurai, which, at that time, had not yet been transcribed or published. Many dissertations and first books written by English language speakers who spent time as assistant language teachers (ALTs) on the JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) Programme began their projects through local history and interacting with local historians, as happened to me<sup>3</sup>. Even in Japan, professional historians, mostly as historians working as university professors, also draw upon the such local historical knowledge production in their own works, and local people are often at the forefront of local historical preservation, as they were after the destruction of 3/11.

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<sup>2</sup> See Gramlich-Oka (2006), Nenzi (2015), Stanley (2020), and Walthall (1998).

<sup>3</sup> My first book drew in large part from local historians, boosters, and research groups related to the history of Oguri Tadamasu, a Tokugawa bannerman who was beheaded not far from the house where I lived as a JET teacher from 1997–1999. See Wert (2013).

Inspired by the work of local people, and using Koume's extant, and incomplete, diary, Partner demonstrates microhistory at its best, in this case, when a life history is used as the locus of a study rather than its focus. In other words, instead of just succumbing to the minutia of daily life, which can quickly drive a reader to think "ok, so what", Partner is able to balance micro and macro history by highlighting the latter without sacrificing the former. And he makes a good case for why using Koume, an otherwise little-known woman with only a local historical and historiographical presence in Japan, as a lens into the late Tokugawa and early Meiji periods is useful: she's from a low-ranking samurai family (we have few details in English on their lived experience), in a politically significant domain (the Kishū domain ruled by one of the Tokugawa branch families), that was nonetheless geographically distant from Edo (most domain studies in English are about domains from eastern Japan, or Satsuma and Chōshū).

Thus, the first two chapters focus on place and time, namely, the challenges and opportunities facing low-ranking samurai families in the region in general, especially during the deadly Temmei Famine (1783–1788). Through Koume, readers learn about how the famine affected her family, which could be generalized to other, similar low-ranking families, and how the famine tied into all kinds of other fields of study like economics, religion, et cetera. True to the book's title, Partner uses the details of Koume's life to illustrate broader issues. I found myself taking notes to add to lectures, and writing down statistics that help me round out observations in my own research. Similarly, in chapter three, one really feels the sense of panic in the domain--and Koume's family--when Perry's "black ships" arrived, even though the domain was located far away from Edo. Partner includes amusing, and telling, rumors that Koume had heard about the ships, for example, that the ships were from France, or that ninety ships had arrived, instead of four (Partner 2024: 71), and, given the distance from Edo, it tells much about how quickly news spread, how accurate it was, and the speed of local reaction.

It is not until the fourth chapter that Partner slows down, and I mean this in a good way, to focus more on the daily life of Koume and her family. The death of her husband, loss of a grandchild, attempts to organize servants and record accounting for the house, gift-giving, and pursuing side employments to supplement the family income are just some of the details that Partner focuses on at just the right section of the book. This chapter pairs well with the following fifth and sixth chapters, which cover the chaos of the years leading up to the Meiji Restoration era and her work as an artist. She does

not say anything about the Restoration and its immediate aftermath itself. In fact, the extant part of her diary ends in late January 1868 and does not begin again until 1876. During this time, her diary reflects more of her family concerns, which are affected, but not dominated by larger events. A final chapter tells much about the difficulties low-ranking samurai families faced during the early Meiji period as their privilege and financial support dried up with the gradual disappearance of their status. Widowed, Koume and her son Yūsuke tried to eke out a living through teaching, tutoring, and the low rents from their tenement house (*nagaya*).

A fellow Japanese historian told me of the time he heard Carlo Ginzburg, one of the most famous practitioners of microhistory, giving a talk at his university where the introducer warned, “don’t try this at home.” This was related to me during a discussion about the seduction, and dangers, of microhistory, especially ones that take an individual as its subject. As someone who has written local history in the past, a field adjacent, perhaps even overlapping, with microhistory, I understand the lure of digging into the details while neglecting the larger historical and historiographical issues, in other words, the looming question of “so what?”. For some readers, this is not an issue, any life is deserving of attention. Fair enough. Luckily, Partner’s work will satisfy all types of readers. It is a useful addition to many subfields within Japanese studies.

## References

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