Japanese Inn: A Reconstruction Of The Past by Oliver Statler

My Personal Review:

Another Admirer Of Japanese Inn

y using his experiences as a civil servant during the American occupation of Japan and the accounts from several generations of inn-keepers of the Minaguchi-ya, Oliver Statler wrote this well-written part-fiction/part-nonfiction book, which was published in 1961. The book drives the readers to experience the development of social Japanese society through the history and survival of an ancient Japanese inn from mid-16th century to the 20th century. Through the eyes and the lives of the inn-keepers of the Minaguchi-ya, the author created a fascinating story that narrates major incidents of Japanese history from 16th to 20th centuries, and he captures the readers to encounter Japanese culture with his use of Asian metaphors and portrayals. There are fifteen chapters in the book with the addition of a "Postscript," which pointed out the facts behind the story of the Minaguchi-ya and its inn-keepers. By looking at the founding of the Minaguchi-ya, the banning of Christianity, and the end of Tokugawa rule as seen in "Japanese Inn," one can understand some of the major social changes of Japan from 16th century to the 19th century.

As evident in the second and third chapters of "Japanese Inn," the founding and the establishment of the inn called Minaguchi-ya occurred during the most critical period of the history of Japan. It was a period of the late 16th century; a period of changes and instability for Japan. It was a time of war between the clans (or noble families) of Japan for dominance and power. An internal war or any battles that took place on one’s own land would interrupt their way of life, including their sense of peace and prosperity. During the fighting, the chief of the mountain clan, Takeda Shingen, had "installed one of his samurai" by the name of Mochizuki to a commanding post in a fort at Okitsu (p. 13-15). It was at Okitsu where Mochizuki had a new house built for his family, but it would soon become an inn at an unforeseen time. Mochizuki had no desire or duty to become an innkeeper since he was an honorable samurai. However, when Tokugawa Ieyasu of Tokugawa clan captured Mochizuki’s fort and the
Takeda clan was defeated, Mochizuki had lost his "samurai ship" but he was not looking for reasons to "lose all honor" in inn keeping, especially for men of important rank (p. 18, 22-27). When a man of higher rank, like a feudal lord, passed by and needed a rest, Mochizuki would feel obligated to take him in for a night's lodging. He may not see his duty as an innkeeper for his customer, but as a samurai for his lord. In the Western year of 1590 with the defeat of Hojo clan, a military leader Toyotomi Hideyoshi became a ruler of Japan which became a united country, and Mochizuki sensed in the eyes of the passing travelers that there was a "new spirit in the land" (p. 34-37). It was a spirit of new energy and a new sense of unity in which the Japanese people would face a new future for Japan. Soon thereafter, Hideyoshi died and Ieyasu became a shogun in which he "set about to found his own dynasty" of Tokugawa family; a family that would rule Japan for the next 250 years, an era of peace and stability (p. 38-40). Along with the founding of the inn, Mochizuki witnessed a first great change in Japan that laid a course for a peaceful and stable country until the mid-19th century.

The second part of the fourth chapter of "Japanese Inn" explores the interaction between an Englishman and Mochizuki and the banning of Christianity in the early 17th century. Since the spread of Christianity reached throughout the Old World including East Asia and Japan, the Japanese people favored a trade with the West because they had benefit from it. And the Christian priests would install their own churches in the lands of Japan and convert as many Japanese people as they could. Due to the increasing trade with the West, the Japanese people would meet many foreigners and learn much about other countries. One of the foreigners that Mochizuki took a great liking to was an Englishman by the name of Will Adams, who was the first Englishman in Japan and "the first European to stay" in Mochizuki's home (p. 58). One of the reasons that Mochizuki enjoyed the company of Adams was his stories about adventures beyond the Japanese seas and his first encounter with Ieyasu. Because Mochizuki was fascinated with Adams' stories and enjoyed his company, he would live out the rest of his life being in awe of other countries and of his new ruler of Japan.

But, the trading with the West would become a problem for Ieyasu, which he believed was causing serious trouble within his own government. Since the Shinto and Buddhism were the religions of Japan, Ieyasu was willing to tolerate the Christians because of the benefited trade, but he soon found out that Japanese Christians were causing "scandals, corruption, and intrigue...within his own palace" and in Japan (p. 67). Ieyasu then became furious and might have soon seen Christianity as destroyer of Japan's religions that he favored. In the early year of 1614, he issued an edict to outlaw Christianity in Japan which lasted "for two and a half centuries," and had all Christian churches in Japan destroyed or "pulled down" to be used as brothels (p. 69). Because of the edict, the trade with the West stopped increasing and Japan shut itself from the rest of the world's development. If the trade with the west would be still increasing for the next 250 years,
Japan would have been a different country and the Tokugawa government would have ruled the country less than 250 years because the Japanese people would have opposed it or other events could have changed the government. But, the Japanese government still remained under the same ruler, the Tokugawa family for 250 years. As for Mochizuki, he saw "very little of his friend Will Adams" after the edict, and he, himself, soon died a natural death and a year later, his son hung up a sign that said "Minaguchi-ya," which signaled the house of the late Mochizuki an official inn (p. 70). In "Japanese Inn," the interaction between an Englishman and Mochizuki brought about the interesting stories for the enjoyment of Mochizuki while the banning of Christianity in Japan during the early 17th century closed Japan's doors from the West.

During the mid-19th century when an era of modernity crept across the Japan Sea toward the fixated medieval Japan, the Tokugawa rule came to an end as witnessed in the twelfth chapter of "Japanese Inn." This chapter deals mainly with a man named Jirocho who "mirror the times between 1820 and 1893" because they were the times that "saw the old government toppled" while new government emerged, saw the 250 years of Japan's isolation ruptured, and saw Japan's entrance into the modern era (p. 246). The 1800s became important and a major change for Japanese people because it would appear to be a new era for them and it would change their views of the world. As a mirror of Japan's changing times, Jirocho was a transforming man from being a "young terror" during childhood to a professional rice merchant, to a gambler, to a peaceful man who served the law, and he was called the Tokaido's number one boss (p. 247-289). Because of Jirocho's infamous reputation, the Japanese people would still view him as an interesting Japanese character of the 19th century. During the changing period in the mid-19th century, the seventeenth innkeeper of the Minaguchi-ya was a man by the name of Mochizuki Hanjuro I whose skills as an innkeeper helped the inn to "move with the times," especially when the fire swept across the town of Okitsu in the winter of 1879 and turned Minaguchi-ya into ashes and it needed to be rebuilt (p. 242, 269, 285). It was Hanjuro's effort in rebuilding Minaguchi-ya that it would fit with the modern times while maintaining its medieval customs and its spirit of Japanese ancient ways. During the period of cha

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