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Book Review by David Daughton

Toward Contemporary Co-operative Studies: Perspectives from Japan's Consumer Co-ops. Edited by *The Consumer Co-operative Institute of Japan*. Tokyo, Japan: Consumer Co-operative Institute of Japan (CCIJ), 2009. 247 pp. ISBN: 9784915307003

The good news is that a patient reader will come away from this collection of research papers and essays with plenty of insight into the origins and evolution of Japan's consumer co-operatives. Many Western co-operators know that a huge number (one third) of Japanese households belong to co-ops, and that many have a track record of commercial success that is considered enviable in other countries. However, few Canadians will have "drilled down" enough to understand the challenges and opportunities that Japan's co-operative sector has dealt with. Here is a book that offers a great overview of everything from the history of Japanese co-operative legislation to the future of the Social Economy and is available to English readers for the first time in one collection.

The reader must be patient because there is a certain amount of duplication and repetition in this collection, and also because the text contains numerous, minor grammatical errors that make for slower than usual reading. The collection would have benefited from a final review by an attentive and scrupulous English language proofreader in order to ensure ease of flow. Be that as it may, by the end of the book the repetition ensures that the reader will have learned a great deal about the fundamentals of consumer co-ops in Japan, and probably more than they need to about the contaminated dumping scandal!

Joking aside, for this reader, the repetition was not altogether unwelcome as it helped me to better understand what the flashpoints and game-changing moments have been for Japan's co-operators in the post-war era. Even though six of the eleven chapters are written by a single author, Akira Kurimoto (Chief Researcher at the Consumer Co-operative Institute of Japan or CCIJ), there is sufficient variety among the remaining authors to provide the reader with a range of perspectives. I was particularly happy to encounter Mari Osawa's gender-based analysis towards the end of the book, which proved key in helping to grasp some of the changes that have swept through Japanese society over the past decades.

Appreciating the role of women as the foundation of everything from Han groups to Home Delivery is another reason to read this book. When describing Japan's post-war shift toward urban and suburban living, Otohiko Hasumi writes in the Introduction, "the most typical pattern of lifestyle ... in which husbands worked long hours for their companies (the Japanese 'salary man') and wives ... took charge of all household related activities" (p. x). Professor Hasumi goes on to describe such housewives as forming "the backbone of co-op's Joint Buying food

distribution system” (p. x), and attributes loyalty to their co-ops as a major factor in the consumer co-operative sector’s growth and success. The key role of women in determining the evolution of Japan’s co-operatives continued as women entered the workforce in ever increasing numbers during the latter half of the 1980s and the 1990s. Dual-income households increased buying power, but at the same time eroded the Joint Buying system’s reliance on someone being at home during the day to accept deliveries and to divide food orders. In response, many co-ops were able to transition to a system of Individual Home Delivery that has proved to be both popular and profitable. However, the resulting reduction in neighbour-to-neighbour communications has posed new challenges for organizations that are rooted in community support networks.

Canadians should find the chapters that deal with legislative changes and with medical co-operatives particularly interesting. Canada’s patchwork of Co-operative Acts seems relatively benign in comparison to the strictures of Japanese legislation that has historically enforced tight geographic market boundaries and restricted co-ops to doing business only with members. After sixty years of the Consumer Co-operative Law (1948), these rules were only minimally eased by the widespread legislative updates and amendments that took place in 2008. On the health front, we can learn much from Japan’s experiences and models, whether from the emphasis on unadulterated foods in grocery stores or the focus on health promotion and disease prevention.

Notwithstanding any quibbles about unpredictable apostrophe use, this is a book that provides all manner of insight into the development of the Japanese Co-operative system and offers a fascinating and in-depth analysis of the elements that have given rise to the phenomenal growth of Japan’s consumer co-ops. Particularly for Canadian readers, it is thought provoking to study the experiences of a nation with many contrasting attributes, such as very high population density and structured gender roles. Yet similarities, such as the challenges occasioned by outdated legislation, also give cause for reflection. Looking at co-ops through the lens of others’ experiences creates a great opportunity for learning.

In his foreword, Professor Emeritus Naohiko Jinno concludes, with the hope, that “this book will contribute to a deeper understanding of Japanese consumer co-ops and further advancement of Consumer Co-op Studies” (p. x). I am confident that he will not be disappointed.

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