

The cartography of self-assertion

Travel is about time and space, faith and ideology, constructs and concepts, about who we are and how we see the world. It is, as Laura Nenzi states in the introduction to her book on recreational travel in early-modern Japan, 'an activity through which life itself could be defined' (p.1). In this fine study Nenzi amply demonstrates that the investigation of mobility and movement is indeed an excellent way to explore the structures and evolution of a society.

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Nenzi, Laura. 2008. *Excursions in Identity, Travel and the Intersection of Place, Gender, and Status in Edo Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. xi, 260 pages, ISBN 978 0 8248 3117 2.

Malleable spaces

Nenzi's argument departs from the premise that spaces are malleable. The first part of her book ('Re-creating spaces') is devoted to showing how officialdom, religion and the discourse of culture and education conceptually organised landscape and provided the traveller with information about where he or she should or should not go. The official post towns, relay stations and checkpoints of Japan's major highways defined landscape in much the same way as the rules concerning sacred space. However, whereas for the utilitarian or official traveller the destination was more important than the road (p.1), the role of the pilgrim enabled the traveller to (temporarily) craft a new identity. This aspect of re-creation was also crucial to the lyrical traveller who visited the landscapes evoked in art and literature, thereby identifying with the cultural icons of the past. By putting 'their own spin on spaces', travellers were able to bypass 'protocols imposed upon the landscape' (p.14). Through the experience of the road, but also through a multitude of texts and images, travel enabled members of one segment of society to appropriate the space of another. In this way travel functioned as 'a convenient platform to question and alter' parameters of status and gender (p.2). In the second part of her book ('Re-creating identities') Nenzi elaborates on the process of personal interaction with landscape; the third part ('Purchasing re-creation') places this interaction in the context of recreational travel as a commodity.

A travel industry

The true breakthrough of what Nenzi has masterfully termed the 'cartography of self-assertion' (p.2) took place in the second half of the Tokugawa period, which was characterised by a booming print industry and a rise in literacy rates. Elegance and self-cultivation were no longer the prerogatives of courtiers, warriors and scholars. Commoners too acquired knowledge about famous places and their literary or historical associations. Nenzi states: 'Those who learned to connect the past and present of certain sites could, like members of the social and intellectual elites, look down on the unsophisticated...[and] take a symbolic step up the social ladder' (p.109). She explains in what manner a vast amount of published materials about travel and landscape revealed to commoners that 'most spaces were open to them and, as a consequence, that the (alleged) rigidity of officialdom and certain branches of religious discourse almost always came with suitable alternatives' (p.122). Moreover, economic growth created an atmosphere where 'money eclipsed status' (p.109), allowing an expanding class of wealthy townspeople to, literally, encroach upon the terrains formerly reserved for the educated elites. In this age of high commercialism a travel industry developed that not only spawned images, travelogues and guidebooks, but also tourist accommodation, a souvenir market, and numerous places where the traveller could eat, drink and be merry. Local food and drink, prostitutes ('transformed into local specialties', p.174), baths and hot springs enabled the traveller not only to re-create his or her identity, but also to regenerate his or her body. Enjoying 'the geographies of pleasure' (p.174) became yet another means for commoners to assert themselves.

Women on the road

Throughout the book special attention is given to female travellers 'not only because they have thus far been relatively neglected...but also because looking at gender most forcefully highlights the disjunction between modes of control on one side and practices on the other' (p.4). Because 'a woman

detached from her designated social niche...was interpreted as a threat to stability' (p.48), both government policy and general ideology were directed at keeping women immobile, often, however, to no avail. Nenzi shows how temples and shrines, driven on the one hand by 'the laws of compassion' and on the other by economic considerations ('donations, after all, knew no gender'), allowed visitors of *both* sexes into their precincts and thus helped to topple barriers set up by officialdom (p.66). To women of high status, however, travel rarely offered an alternative to the invisibility their lifestyle required. Whether on the road in the context of the system of alternate attendance in the shogunal capital of Edo (*sankin kōtai*), for religious reasons, or going to hot springs for their health, they invariably travelled in closed palanquins that kept them inside while being outside (p.80). Female travellers of commoner status would be less restricted; peasant women and women from fishing villages travelling to city markets, for instance, were a perfectly acceptable phenomenon (p.75). Transferring one's authority within the household and becoming a mother-in-law would likewise enable the commoner woman 'to leave the house more often and for longer periods of time' (p.85). In general, Nenzi argues, marginality meant freedom; those who had 'lost all strategic value as a pillar of order and producer of a family line' (p.84), like elderly women, widows, nuns, or such rootless figures as itinerant performers and prostitutes, would be allowed to take to the road without much interference.

Maps and guidebooks

Nenzi uses a wide variety of sources ranging from diaries, poetry and official directives to guidebooks for red-light

Fig 1 (above):
Suzuki Harunobu,
Two wayfarers,
c. 1768-9

Fig.2 (below):
Isoda Koryusai,
Dreaming of
walking near Fuji,
c. 1770-3



districts and board games. Her book's illustrations are very much part of the narrative; indeed, the introduction of visual representations of space is indispensable for a proper discussion of 'the manifold ways in which spaces were interpreted, assigned specific meanings, re-presented, and, ultimately, exploited' (p.8). Nenzi focuses on the visual representation of Mount Fuji, and her discussion of the various ways in which the depiction of this most Japanese of landmarks reveals discourses and their agendas is particularly enlightening.

The book has a slight tendency to be repetitive, but one could contend that a regular re-expounding of the main elements of the argument was a necessity in view of the complexity of the subject. This complexity is very real, even for a book that has no ambition to be 'a comprehensive social and cultural history of travel', but seeks to present 'a selection of themes in the hope of generating debate and stimulating further inquiries' (p.6). It was her intention, Nenzi states, to depart where Constantine Vaporis' *Breaking Barriers: Travel and the State in Early Modern Japan* of 1994 leaves off (p.6). Vaporis' work is mainly on the institutional side of travel but in his concluding chapter he makes a first move to draw the attention to the leisurely traveller and the fact that the Tokugawa authorities consistently failed to recognise his existence. Nenzi set out to explore the motives and experiences of this type of traveller and the (far-reaching) repercussions of his movements. In doing so she has produced a truly inspiring book.

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