

Oura Kei, Nagasaki's Remarkable Tea Merchant

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The original site of the spacious home of Oura Kei, the Nagasaki woman responsible for expanding Japan's foreign tea trade, has been usurped by a white five-story building filled with stores selling – amid the cacophony of three different pop tunes – everything from guitars to T-shirts. Only on the fifth floor where a kimono shop waits quietly for customers, can I begin to imagine Oura living here with her wealthy oil-merchant family. The other clue to the area's former life besides its name, Aburaya-machi (literally, Oil Shop Town), is the more traditional market across the street, emanating the smells of fresh flowers and fish.

What remains of Oura's house in neighboring Fufugawa-machi has become the first floor of the home of a wealthy man who owns a scrap metal company. The expanse of wood-framed sliding doors opening onto a smoothly polished wooden interior hints at a residence that must have been impressive in its day.

Like the remains of her home, evidence of Oura's past, scattered in bits and pieces, adds to the mystery of her life. A thirty-minute drive away, along winding coastal roads in the Sanwa-cho suburb of Nagasaki, resides Taketani Masakazu one of Oura's few living relatives. Mr. Taketani's paternal grandfather, Masaichi, was her nephew. The seventy-six year-old Mr. Taketani still has a collection of memorabilia related to his famous ancestor, spared damage from the fire that destroyed his previous home. Among the most precious surviving fragments of Oura's life is a photo of her taken when she was about thirty years old. The original picture, yellowed by the years, has been tucked behind the framed enlargement Mr. Taketani's grandfather had made, but the copy preserves the direct gaze of the small woman wearing a dark kimono. His face lit with quiet pride, Mr. Taketani shows me newspaper clippings, family records, and a metal plate engraved with the picture of a ship, which was given to the family on the 100th anniversary of the first exportation of Oura Kei's tea. He recalls his grandfather describing her as "strong like a man in her way of doing things." Mr. Taketani, like most everyone I spoke to, refers to her as "O-Kei," her first name preceded by the honorific "O" which is used to show respect. While his grandfather did inherit the entrepreneurial spirit, founding an iron and steel works, the business of tea is no longer in the family. The yellow-green liquid, however, is ever-present during the interview, served to us by Mrs. Taketani, in small porcelain cups along with Oreo cookies, Japanese sweets, and orange slices.

Oura Kei's family life is riddled with mystery, beginning with her origins. Her natural father was adopted into the Oura family, a common practice used in those days to secure a male heir. Her mother's identity remains a mystery. Temple records tell of the early death of her father's first wife several years before Oura Kei was born in 1828. Since there is no record of a second wife, her mother may have been a courtesan whose existence the family kept secret, bringing Oura and her older sister into the household.

Oura did not leave personal letters behind, so her love life, shrouded in mystery as well, has become the object of considerable speculation. Meiji Period (1868 to 1912) novelist, Ito Chiyu, portrays her as a strong-willed woman who sends her new husband away the day after their marriage because he is not good enough for her. A local history teacher, interviewed on a Nagasaki Broadcasting Company television program, speculates that she was a merchant with the heart of a woman. All

that is known with some certainty is that the man she was to marry, who had also been adopted into the Oura family, died at the age of twenty-three, most likely from cholera. She never married afterwards, and like her paternal grandparents before her, adopted a son in order to have a male heir. Ironically, the trail of her direct descendants ends with him, and it is Oura Kei's achievements that immortalize the family name.

By the time Admiral Matthew Calbraith Perry visited Japan in 1853 to convince the government to reopen the country's ports to foreign trade, Oura, now twenty-five, was already an experienced oil merchant. At the time, the government had lifted its monopoly on heating oil, forcing established merchant families like the Ouras to seek other markets. Oura Kei used her connections in Nagasaki's trading community to discover a potential market for tea, collect tea samples, and send them to America, England and Arabia through the Dutch firm Textor & Company. British merchant and Nagasaki resident William Alt, her first customer, placed an order for tea. Oura had to gather enough tea to fill his substantial request for 100 piculs (1 picul = 133.3 lbs.) by obtaining tea from Ureshino in neighboring Saga Prefecture. The town, which remains a major Japanese tea producing area today, preserves the grave site of Miyazaki Tokumatsu, the local merchant who supplied Oura with the tea. Appropriately, his family plot overlooks a small cluster of neat tea gardens.

In 1872, Oura's finances and her business relationship with Alt were dealt a serious blow by a fraud trial involving a young member of the elite samurai warrior class. The British merchant had placed an order for tobacco with the samurai but the young man had failed to hold up his end of the contract. Alt & Co. won the case in court probably the first instance of modern litigation between Japanese and foreign concerns – and since Oura was the samurai's financial backer she had no choice but to pay the bill. In order to do this, it is said that she sold her home and many of her fine kimonos. Whether the loss sapped her spirits, eventually leading to her demise, or she simply lived an average life span for the times, she died thirteen years later at the age of fifty-seven.

Regardless of her financial difficulties in later life, Oura's career was highly successful, established during a period that was particularly advantageous, not only as a result of Perry's push to open Japanese markets and the arrival of other foreign powers fast in his wake, but also because it occurred before the enactment of the 1898 Japanese Civil Code severely limited the rights of women. Nagasaki, long noted for its contact with the outside world, was the right place for a woman merchant to be. As Oura's contemporary, British Captain Sherard Osborn, notes in his 19th-century journal after a voyage to the port city, "[the Japanese woman] has succeeded in asserting her right to be treated like a rational being, quite as well able to take care of herself as the sterner sex."

In addition, thanks to their wealth and the influence it created, Nagasaki's merchant class, for the most part, lived outside the social convention that put the samurai at the top of the class structure. Oura, as a member of a merchant family, would have escaped the restrictions imposed on samurai women, receiving an education suited to managing and running a family-owned business. Even with these benefits, however, most women did not rise to the occasion in a manner even approaching that of Oura Kei. In 1884, the year of her death, Oura was honored as a person of wealth and influence, receiving a twelve-character posthumous name (an honor usually reserved for men of a high social status) from the Buddhist temple to which she and her family belonged. At her funeral, four priests, including the head priest, were present. That same year, Japan's Minister of Commerce and Agriculture recognized her mercantile achievements with an award.

Recently, a budding interest in the accomplishments of women has led to articles and books detailing the lives of prominent female citizens of Nagasaki, including Oura Kei. The city's premiere tea merchant has also become good marketing for the Nagasaki-based Jidaiya company which prints a blurb on her in both English and Japanese, on three sides of its tin of green tea.

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