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Review of Dasho Keiji Nishioka: A Japanese Who Lived for Bhutan, by Tshering Cigay Dorji and Dorji Penjore (2011)

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Keiji Nishioka lived in and "for" Bhutan for 28 years, from 1964 to 1992, and played a pivotal role in modernizing the country's farming sector and remains a deeply respected figure in Bhutan. In Dasho Keiji Nishioka: A Japanese Who Lived in Bhutan, Dr. Tshering Cigay Dorji and Dr. Dorji Penjore offer an intimate and richly detailed portrayal of Keiji's life journey—a major strength of the work, as will be reiterated later in this review.

The writing of the book was initiated during the authors' stay in Japan. This provided them with the valuable opportunity to build close relationships with Satoko and Yoko, his wife and daughter, and gain intimate insights into family stories. Dr. Tshering Cigay Dorji was pursuing his PhD at Tokushima University, while Dr. Dorji Penjore was a visiting assistant professor at Kyoto University.

The authors conducted face-to-face interviews with Satoko and Yoko in various settings: at Satoko's residence, the "Bhutan House," which is filled with artefacts and photographs for visitors; and at Koyasan, a centre of Vajrayāna Buddhism, where Keiji's remains are enshrined in a temple altar. The book contains numerous photographs of Keiji with his family, colleagues, and farmers, reproduced with the permission of Satoko and the National Museum of Ethnology, Japan.

Keiji arrived in Bhutan at a time when agriculture was still primarily subsistence-based, with virtually no markets for buying or selling produce. Farmers cultivated crops—mainly rice and vegetables in Paro—of fewer varieties than they potentially could have, and there was ample room for improving their farming methods to enhance productivity; these included rice plantations, undertaken

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randomly instead of in straight lines and columns that would have eased weeding and aeration (p. 37).

The book builds on the authors' personal bonds with Satoko and Yoko to vividly portray how Keiji "weathered the vagaries of Himalayan climate; ... toiled and sweated with the farmers; dug the foundations of modern agriculture; sowed the first seeds of agriculture revolution; ignited the first dynamo farming technology; watered dry fields with modern irrigation; created vibrant communities out of malaria-infested sub-tropical lands; and many more" (p. 13).

More importantly, beyond documenting one man's life, the book sheds light on Bhutan's ability to inspire outsiders to work in genuine partnership with its people. Keiji not only appreciated this quality but also benefited from it. As the authors note, "If there is one word that describes him, it is 'selflessness'" (p. 9). At the same time, behind his "selfless" contributions to the country lay reciprocal relationships he cultivated with the Bhutanese people he worked alongside—grounded in mutual trust and obligation and rooted in his deep respect for Bhutanese society.

This review will return to this point, drawing out its wider implications for contemporary Bhutan, which seeks to "sow the seeds" for its industrial restructuring. Before doing so, it will summarize the book's outline, followed by the reviewer's assessments of the book, with a focus on its vivid and engaging accounts of the life journey of Keiji, who "still lives on in the hearts of the Bhutanese people, especially farmers" (p. 9).

Legacies Presented in Dasho Keiji Nishioka: A Japanese Who Lived for Bhutan

After its introductory chapter, the book turns to Keiji's "early life" (Chapter 2), describing how he grew up and eventually became a university student majoring in agriculture. His university supervisor, Dr. Sasuke Nakao, played a pivotal role in facilitating Keiji's assignment in Bhutan (Chapter 3 "mystical Bhutan beckons"). He recommended Keiji to Prime Minister Jigme Palden as an agricultural expert for Bhutan, at the latter's request.

In 1962, Keiji and his wife Satoko, joined a Himalayan expedition organized by Dr. Nakao (Chapter 4 "preparing for Bhutan"). During

the journey, they visited the Bhutan House in Kalimpong, India, the then diplomatic hub of the Bhutanese government. After the expedition, they stayed in Nepal's highlands to study local livelihoods and vegetation before traveling to Kolkata to meet the Consul General of Japan, who maintained close ties with Bhutan's royal family.

In 1964, the Overseas Technical Cooperation Agency (OTCA)—the predecessor of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)—decided to dispatch Keiji to Bhutan, and he and Satoko departed Japan (Chapter 5 "first two years in Paro"). After obtaining a permit in New Delhi, they flew to a border town, crossed into Bhutan by car, and reached Paro after nightfall. The next morning, Keiji wasted no time in visiting the agriculture office, where he received a frosty reception from the Bhutanese government's resident director—an Indian national who insisted that the agricultural know-how of Japan, an island nation, would hardly suit Bhutan. Undeterred, Keiji resolved to "let the results speak" (p. 36) by planting rice and vegetable seeds brought from Japan on a small "experiment farm" allocated by the government.

By the end of his second year, Keiji's determination had borne fruit. He was granted a total area of 22 acres, four young apprentices, and most significantly, an audience with His Majesty the King (Chapter 7 "Paro Bondey Farm"). When a session of the National Assembly was held nearby, all its members were invited to the newly named "Bondey Farm," where local farmers also learned firsthand the potential of cultivating new varieties of vegetables and fruits. Officials from OTCA visited the farm as well, resulting in the provision of farm machinery and opportunities for training in Japan.

Keiji firmly believed that farming in Bhutan could become a profitable occupation through mechanization and commercialization. The conviction led him to encourage farmers to sell their produce in Thimphu and other towns. Vegetables were sold out within hours. His confidence in the agricultural potential deepened after journeys with Satoko to central and eastern Bhutan—traveling on foot and horseback (Chapter 6 "journeys to the East"). During the trips, they not only learned the challenges faced by Bhutanese farmers but also came across local specialties such as glutinous rice, soybean paste,

buckwheat, and cheese—most of them being familiar to them in Japan in different processed forms.

In 1976, Keiji relocated from Paro to Zhemgang, which had been struck by famine the previous year and was receiving emergency food aid from the government (Chapter 8 "five years with Khengpas"). His work was focused on helping communities transition from shifting cultivation to permanent settlements equipped with irrigation channels, farm roads, and suspension bridges. He mobilized local residents to construct these facilities alongside other sanitation-related infrastructure as well as health clinics.

Upon completion of his assignment in Zhemgang in 1980, Keiji was recalled to the Paro Bondey Farm with his main mission to promote agricultural mechanization, seed and nursery production, and food processing (Chapter 9 "the Royal recognition"). Six months after his return, he was awarded the "Red Scarf" and conferred the title of "Dasho" (literally meaning "The Best") by His Majesty the King. The Agriculture Machinery Centre was thereafter established to distribute agricultural implements at subsidized rates. The National Seed and Plant Programme was likewise set up to meet the requirements for seeds and planting materials, together with a nursery centre and a food processing unit.

Keiji's life came to an unexpected halt in March 1992, when his condition worsened suddenly (Chapter 10 "toothache, death and a funeral"). Honouring his contributions, a state funeral was conducted in Thimphu with attendance from all walks of life—the royal family, dignitaries, senior government officials as well as many farmers—together with Satoko, Yoko, and other friends and acquaintances from Japan. Keiji was posthumously awarded the Druk Thugsay Medal ("Heart Son of Bhutan"), the nation's highest civilian honour, in 1999 (Chapter 12 "last words, uncle from the mountains").

The Book's Immersive Glimpse Into Keiji's Journey in Bhutan

The foremost strength of *Dasho Keiji Nishioka: A Japanese Who Lived for Bhutan* lies in its Bhutanese authorship, which makes the work accessible and meaningful to both Bhutanese and non-Bhutanese readers. Unlike biographies by Japanese writers with no family connection to the Nishiokas—which often limit their scope to

remain accessible to Japanese audiences, who are not necessarily familiar with Bhutan—this book offers far more comprehensive, vivid, and engaging accounts of Keiji's life and its impacts.

This strength manifests in how the book situates Keiji's story within the broader trajectory of Bhutan's relations with Japan. It evocatively recounts how he helped lay the foundation for diplomatic ties between Bhutan and Japan, which were officially established in 1986 and have continued to flourish to this day (Chapter 11, "A Tale of Two Monarchies: Bhutan–Japan Relations"). Thanks in part to Keiji's pioneering efforts, the two countries have sustained close royal ties, while JICA has made agricultural support one of its priority areas. Japan's position as Bhutan's second-largest development partner can be traced back to his enduring legacies.

JICA's commitment to Bhutan's agricultural development was "not built in one day"; it was due to Keiji's relentless efforts to deliver direct and pragmatic assistance that brought tangible benefits to Bhutanese farmers. When the downpour and windstorm washed away the Bondey Farm in 1968, he secured emergency assistance in the form of heavy machinery, while taking the matter as high as the prime minister's office, in defiance of the OTCA's rejection (p. 56). Another testimony, among numerous others, is the start of the Japanese grant aid of power tillers and tractors, which have been donated to and have immensely benefited farmers across the country (p. 86).

Moreover, the book's lively depictions include those of Keiji's immersion in Bhutanese society, which enabled him to leave an indelible mark on the country's agricultural development. In this respect, the book vividly describes Keiji and Satoko's bond with Zangmo and Wangdi, whom they met soon after arriving in Paro. The Bhutanese couple became their "Ama" and "Apa" in Bhutan (pp. 37–38), sharing unsold food items at a time when food markets were scarcely available. Satoko fondly recalls their kindness (p. 38), suggesting that these ties fostered the Nishiokas' deep admiration for Bhutanese society and culture. At "Ama" and "Apa's" home, the couple enjoyed "Apa" and Lopen Drengo singing Bhutanese songs—the latter would later become a renowned singer (p. 38).

Keiji and Satoko's profound appreciation of Bhutan is also portrayed through the book's accounts of their travels beyond Paro—

trekking on foot along winding trails and riding horseback across sweeping valleys. In autumn 1964, they accompanied a young agriculture officer to his new posting in Bumthang, trekking six days from Wangdue to Trongsa Dzong, visiting Punakha Dzong, attending the *tshepagme wang* in Trongsa, and observing cattle herding in Bumthang (p. 41). In September 1966, they travelled to Trashigang and Samdrup Jongkhar for a feasibility study on establishing a sericulture farm in eastern Bhutan (pp. 41–43). Although there was no east–west highway at the time, they chose to travel entirely within Bhutan on foot and horseback, rather than passing through India.

The book's immersive portrayal of Keiji's journey is further strengthened by its refusal to overly idealize his farmers-first stance. Keiji was by no means perfect, and this acknowledgment adds depth to his "larger-than-life" presence in Bhutan (the title of Chapter 1). According to the authors' accounts of his stay in Zhemgang, he often lost his temper and would coerce and drag anyone who refused to work or cooperate with him—whether government officials or farmers (pp. 75–77).

Beyond Selflessness: Gratitude and Context in Keiji's Legacy

At the same time, the book's lifelike accounts, founded on its distinctive authorship and immersive glimpse into Keiji's life in Bhutan, would have been further enhanced had there been more explicit references to Keiji's feeling of gratitude toward Bhutanese society. As noted in the book, "Bhutanese accepted him as one of their own and loved him" (p. 9). Nevertheless, it is equally crucial to note what Satoko describes as "a sense of gratitude for giving us the wonderful life" in the expanded edition of a memoir originally coauthored by her and Keiji in 1978 (Nishioka & Nishioka, 1998, p. 255). This sentiment encapsulates Keiji's own and underscores the mutual appreciation that defined his relationships with Bhutan.

The reciprocal sense of gratitude is crucial in that it could serve as a useful lens to reinterpret his legacies; his thankfulness was not passive but shaped practical outcomes like knowledge exchange and innovation. As recounted in the Nishiokas' memoir, Keiji did benefit from farmers' know-how. For example, he learned farming methods from hillside farmers in Paro when he was using less favourable land

assigned to him in the second year (Nishioka & Nishioka, 1998, pp. 151–153). This exchange of ideas led to high yields of vegetables, culminating in the establishment of the Bondey Farm in the third year. In Zhemgang, he also learned and applied community-based techniques to build infrastructure such as bridges and irrigation canals in cost-effective ways (Nishioka & Nishioka, 1998, pp. 248–249).

Against this background, Keiji's farmer-centered stance—to "work with farmers and understand local village life" (p. 80)—was rooted in his deep sense of gratitude toward the people with whom he worked. His principle of "farmers first" can surely be traced to the "selflessness" mentioned in the above quote. At the same time, the book might have gained additional depth not only by emphasizing this altruistic quality, but also by drawing more attention to another crucial dimension—Keiji's profound gratitude.

Moreover, the book could have narrated Keiji's sense of gratitude in relation to the opportune timing of his stay in Bhutan. Keiji's achievements also hinged on the progress that the country steadily made since the beginning of its planned development in 1961. While the book implicitly acknowledges the role of Bhutan's policy trajectory by referring to some of the five-year plans (p. 56, p. 58, p. 76), an even stronger connection could have been drawn between his successes and the unfolding of these plans.

Notably, the Fifth Five-Year Plan, launched in 1981, was significant because it was the first to articulate Bhutan's long-term vision of "economic self-reliance." During the 1980s, agricultural modernization became a central pillar of the government's strategy to achieve this goal. Within this policy environment, Keiji found a timely opportunity to arrange subsidized machinery, secure Japanese-donated power tillers and tractors, and expand access to seeds, planting materials, nursery services, and food processing facilities.

These achievements would have been far less likely without the country's readiness to embrace the vision of "economic self-reliance," or more specifically, the underlying progress that the Planning Commission (1981, p. 38) described as "a watershed in Bhutan's socio-economic development." By the start of the Fifth Plan—just two decades after planned development began with full Indian support—Bhutan had already established a stronger foundation.

Almost all government positions had been filled by Bhutanese nationals (Planning Commission, 1981, p. 22).

This institutional capacity enabled the effective utilization of subsidies, donated machinery, and farming support. By 1980, the Bondey Farm had grown to approximately 40 staff, 30 farmhands, and 150 trainees from across the country (p. 80). The timing, therefore, could not have been more opportune for Keiji to help launch the all-out modernization effort.

The Book's Significance and Implications for Present-Day Bhutan

It is accordingly crucial to frame Keiji's legacies in view of his reciprocal ties to the country and the people he worked alongside, with appreciation. The book does highlight this by alluding to a statement he made to a newspaper at the time he was conferred the title of "Dasho": "What has been conferred upon me by His Majesty the King has mainly come about because I have very good Bhutanese colleagues" (p. 80). He stressed that the award was "the recognition of everybody who had worked with him" (p. 80).

In this way, the book sheds light on Keiji's appreciative sense of mutual trust and obligation, while also pointing to the desirability of further elaboration on this theme across the chapters, as noted above. The reciprocal ties between Keiji and the Bhutanese people carry contemporary significance, for just as Keiji's efforts once "sowed the first seeds of agricultural revolution" (p. 13), the country is now seeking to "sow the seeds" for its industrial restructuring.

Keiji's resolve to "work hard in order to be worthy of the honour" of the title of "Dasho," noted in the book (p. 80), offers a model for foreign experts engaging in the Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) project. In this respect, the book makes a pertinent reference to Rudyard Kipling's poem If: "If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue, or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch" (p. 12). The line underscores a maxim that development partnerships succeed when foreign experts—like Keiji—are able to move fluidly between official settings and the grassroots level, without losing humility, cultural respect, or a sense of shared purpose.

Keiji was "a friend of the high and the low alike" (p. 12), in that he not only engaged with dignitaries and officials ("walk with Kings")

but also lived and worked closely with farmers ("keep the common touch"). This unwavering constancy in Keiji's character is what those concerned with the GMC project could learn from Keiji's life journey—the story "deserves to be narrated so that people could draw inspiration and learn from it" (p. 9).

Keiji's appreciation of Bhutanese society and culture likely enabled him to uphold what his daughter Yoko described as "a higher purpose to achieve" (p. 109). Grounded in this awareness, he felt equally at ease in both official and grassroots settings, maintaining respect, humility, and authenticity in each. Whether negotiating in a "higher ladder" forum or working within a village, his stance remained unwavering.

This quality of Keiji's continues to resonate in Bhutan's present-day development vision, as reflected in the deliberations surrounding the GMC project. The Bhutan Innovation Forum, held on October 1–3, 2024, brought together over 100 speakers from more than 60 countries—including four Nobel Laureates—many of whom voiced deep admiration for Bhutanese culture and values. Their reflections echoed the humility and cultural respect Keiji exemplified, demonstrating that meaningful partnerships require not just expertise but also trust, respect, and mutual commitment.

At the Forum, Dasho Karma Yonten emphasized that the GMC project "has been designed based on the ethos of Bhutan and on the value of Gross National Happiness that would make GMC a really unique place." He further noted that Bhutan must attract "the right kind of investors that we want in Bhutan." Implicit in this is the importance of seeking collaborators who, like Keiji, respect and admire Bhutanese society and culture—partners who can nurture mutual trust and a shared sense of purpose.

Keiji's life journey, as vividly portrayed in the book, illustrates why this approach is plausible. The book, capturing his spirit of humility and shared purpose, shows how Bhutan can continue to inspire and host overseas partners who embody the values he exemplified—an unwavering stance grounded in respect and genuine commitment to the country.

In this sense, the book serves not only as a historical reflection but also as a valuable compass for Bhutan's future development

partnerships. Although the authors modestly state their aim "to inculcate an understanding of Bhutan's contemporary history among the young Bhutanese readers" (p. 9), the work offers lessons that extend far beyond history, pointing toward models of collaboration rooted in trust and reciprocity.

Bhutan's strength lies in its ability to inspire partnerships grounded in mutual respect and obligation—a lesson as vital for the GMC project as it was during Bhutan's agricultural revolution. This enduring quality, embodied in Keiji's legacy, offers guidance for foreign specialists who may join Bhutan's current journey, demonstrating how expertise, when coupled with humility and commitment, can blossom into lasting collaboration.

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