A nightmare in the making: war, nation and children's media in Japan, 1891-1945

Those in the field of Japanese and Asian studies are undoubtedly familiar with Japan's wartime propaganda of "human bullets" (nikudan), group suicide (shidō gokuryū), and the ubiquitous 'one hundred million' (ichiboku), but readers may be surprised to learn that none of these tropes of national unity through sacrificial death were unique to the war years themselves. Nor were they primarily directed at adults.

The culpability of adults in creating a manly world of sacrificial death and unquestioning loyalty is clear. Their stories, images, and, perhaps, their casual talk to their children, provided the ground from which these stories of women's sacrifice and nation's glory were born. How then did adults -- in the absence of women's voices -- propagate these ideas? How did they adapt and modify women's narratives of sacrifice and death to suit their own ends? To what extent were adults influenced by their female counterparts in shaping the cultural landscape of sacrifice and death in Japan? These questions come to the fore in the examination of the role that mass print media played in the construction of the "culture of death" so prevalent in the history of the Pacific War. In this paper, I argue that the power of children's print media was such that even when not overtly didactic, they acted as cultural agents, shaping children's images of sacrifice, heroism, and nationhood.

The battle of children's print media

Children's media in Japan has a long history, dating back to the Meiji years (Griffiths 2002). Historians generally identify the early 1890s as the birth of modern Japanese children's media, the very moment that the Meiji government embarked on its first expansionist war against China in 1894 (Hasegawa 1999; Futagami 1978). Although not arising in direct response to the Sino-Japanese War, early Japanese children's media eagerly embraced war, as did most members of Japanese society, and represented it to children as a "culture of death" so prevalent in the history of the Pacific War. The Sino-Japanese War presented the first opportunity for war and emergent nationalism to be "textualized" specifically for children (Hasagawa 1999) and provided much of the language and imagery with which adult producers created Japan's first truly "child-centred" media. The pioneer in all of this was Iwaya Sazanami who wrote "first generation" and "second generation" children's fairy tales and adventure stories, and then published in book form (Kuwahara 1987; Kato 1986).

Collectively these tales of heroism, adventures, heroism, and death projected young boys, and some girls, with powerful didactic models with which children could imagine their future roles in the Japanese empire. And children's magazines were the perfect medium through which these stories could be transmitted. Due to their low cost and portability, children's magazines transcended geography and class and therefore performed an important mediatory function linking home, school and play. The stories adults created for children consumed this media by choice rather than by fiat, magazines reflected children's subjective preferences to a degree that was almost exclusively a masculine one. The power of children's media, even when not overtly didactic, stemmed from its uniquely commercial impulse, its function as entertainment and its interplay with other forms of socialization and education.

Media, modernity and nation

Throughout this golden age of children's print media we see the reciprocal interaction of art and life, fact and fiction, and politics and entertainment. Here I have offered only a small sampling from an astonishingly rich and diverse body of material to argue that the "culture of death" so prevalent in Japan's history was a product of the early 1920s and the early 1930s numerous stories appeared in which Japan's military was pitted against one or more of the great powers in a fight to the death. These stories were remarkably consistent. Japan's military would first "reduc[e] the enemy and be annihilated into dust by their superior technology". Then, at the end, a mysterious piece of new technology would appear, usually commanded by child or children, and sacrifice themselves and die for their country and save the nation. On "the adventure novel" genre (shiken-shoota) pioneered by Oshikawa Shin’ichi in the post-Russian-Japanese War era, these stories were frequently first serialized in magazines like Shinben no kai (Children's World) and Shinhen kurabu (Boys' Club) and then published in book form (Kuwahara 1987; Kato 1986).

Men also created the print media technolog- ies that enabled generations of Japan's children to consume a fifty-year diet of vicarious war and sacrificial death as an always noble, always male, and oft-times glorious adventure. We cannot say for sure exactly what impact this diet had on the young men who fought and died while brutalizing the peoples of Asia during the Pacific War. Sixty years after the fact, answers to these questions still remain elusive. Further analysis of those who created it, however, may bring us closer to understanding the relationship between the consumption of war as education and entertainment and the prosecution of war as political policy. Analyzing Japan as a case-study will provide a deeper and perhaps new understanding of its mod- ern history and the development of its own national ethos. I hope it will also serve as a mirror in which we can see our own reflection as we memorialize and remember the great tragedy of six decades past, while we struggle with yet another kind of war in the young 21st century.

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