

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 (*shūdan gyokusai*), and the ubiquitous 'one hundred million' (*ichioku*), 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.

Owen Griffiths

From the earliest beginnings of modern Japanese children's media in the 1890s, war and heroic, sacrificial death occupied a central place in the stories and imagery children consumed as entertainment. These representations collectively formed one of the most enduring themes in Japanese children's media throughout the first half of the 20th century. Decades before publishers of the 1930s and 1940s were compelled to represent war as a sacred undertaking of national survival and Asian liberation, children's media producers had been creating adventure stories and morality tales based on the heroic and selfless patriotism of men in battle, dying, not for themselves, but for the greater good of the emperor/nation or for the liberation of the 'lesser peoples' of Asia. Thus, the increasingly single-minded glorification of manly, sacrificial death in war – what I have called the 'culture of death' – we see building from 1937 to 1945 must be understood in this broader context of children's media constructions of gendered nationalism that date back to the Meiji years (Griffiths 2002).

The anniversary of Japan's defeat in the Pacific War gives us pause to reflect on the incredible human suffering generated by that conflict and to examine once again the mechanisms by which people can be socialized to kill and die in the name of sovereign, nation or god. Sadly, such an assessment holds profound relevance to our contemporary world when national and religious leaders continue to enjoin their followers to slaughter others for allegedly moral causes. I am particularly interested in analyzing the formation and role of mass print media and its use of war and remembrance as tools in the socialization and education of Japanese boys and girls until the end of the Pacific War.

Together with the formal education of the classroom and the non-formal education of the home, informal education offered through children's print media was the principle means by which young Japanese were simultaneously educated and entertained until the advent of the electronic age. Thus, its analysis as the product of new commercial and technological forces provides insight into the process by which gendered identities are created and maintained within a larger national discourse. It also allows us to examine how the adult producers, as members of the new middle class, constructed the world of modern children and by what rationale they transmitted their fears and aspirations to them.

My purpose here is two-fold. First, I maintain that much of the gendered rhetoric of manly, sacrificial death we see emerging during Japan's years of total war (1937-1945) can be traced back to the earliest days of children's print

media in the 1890s. Second, I argue this development was not particular to Japan. Without question, the process by which Japanese children were enjoined to glorify and eventually prepare for their own sacrificial deaths during the Pacific War was rooted in historical and contemporary practices specific to Japan's own development. However, the utilization of war as a tool of nation building was not. War and its remembrances are central to the identities of all modern nations and the media produced by a rising new middle class has been a key player in this process.

The birth of children's print media

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 readily embraced war, as did most members of Japanese society, and represented it to children as a masculine, heroic, and patriotic undertaking. The Sino-Japanese War presented the first opportunity for war and emergent nationalism to be 'textualized' specifically for children (Hasegawa 1999: 9) 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 the first modern children's story *Kogane maru* in 1891 and began Japan's first modern children's magazine *Shōnen sekai* (*Children's World*) in 1895. As an elite product of the new Meiji state, Iwaya saw war as an appropriate theme with which to entertain young boys while simultaneously instilling in them a sense of loyalty and devotion to their new nation.

In the hands of Iwaya and those who followed him, particularly the founder of Kodansha Publishing Noma Seiji, we see the development of a number of martial, manly themes that would endure well into Japan's years of total war. Among the most prominent was

adults, as they always do, transferred their aspirations, fears, and biases directly to children through the narratives they created for entertainment

the excavation of Japan's past for the great martial heroes from history and myth. From the first Emperor Jimmu and Yamato Takeru to Minamoto Yoshitsune and Kusunoki Masashige, all of Japan's great military heroes regularly galloped across the pages of children's magazines as paragons of loyalty and sacrifice. As Japan's modern wars were fought and simultaneously historicized, new heroes like Captain Matsuzaki Naomi, said to be the first commis-



Momotaro, the peach boy

sioned officer to die in the Sino-Japanese War, the resolute Mitsushima Kan, and the indomitable bugler Kikuchi Kōhei joined this pantheon of selfless patriots (Kuboi 1997; Kuwahara 1987). Their lives, or rather deaths, and the cause for which they fought became the templates for innumerable other characters whose exploits were reborn in the pages of children's magazines throughout Japan's age of imperial expansion and war.

Underlying all of these stories lay another consistent theme of 'rewarding good and punishing evil' (*kanzen chōaku*), now reworked in modern form with the emperor/nation at its heart. This concept had been rooted in Japanese folktales for centuries, but its most immediate influence on the early producers of modern children's media can be traced to the *gesaku* (playful composition) tradition of Takizawa Bakin and other famous Edo-era writers. Even Momotaro, one the most beloved Japanese fairy tales, was subject to this modern process of reinvention. (Namekawa 1981) Beginning with his thorough 'Japanization' in the Meiji era, Momotaro was by the 1930s transformed into a military patriot fighting, not for a pot of gold or the old couple who raised him, but to rid the world of 'evil-doers' in the name of the emperor.

This seamless blending of contemporary, historical, and mythical figures was another enduring theme in modern children's stories from the Sino-Japanese War onward. Grounded in the context of contemporary war and conflict, the stories adults created for children blurred the line between fantasy and reality by appropriating history and

sacrificial death was often portrayed through futuristic stories of mass annihilation in the context of Japan at war with other great powers. Painfully prophetic, these tales reflected a genuine adult dissatisfaction with the outcome of the naval treaties Japan had signed in the wake of WWI. Between 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. The storylines were remarkably consistent. Japan's military would first 'reluctantly' engage the enemy and be annihilated due to their foe's superior technology. Then, at the end, a mysterious piece of new technology would appear, usually commanded by child or adolescent warriors, to destroy the enemy and save the nation. Drawing on the 'adventure novel' genre (*bōken shosetsu*) pioneered by Oshikawa Shunrō in the post-Russo-Japanese War era, these stories were frequently first serialized in magazines like *Shōnen sekai* (*Children's World*) and *Shōnen kurabu* (*Boys' Club*) and then published in book form (Kuwahara 1987; Katō 1968).

Collectively, these tales of adventures, heroism, and death provided 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 playground. Moreover, because children consumed this media by choice rather than by fiat, magazines reflected children's subjective preferences to a degree that purely educational materials did not. Thus, 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 amazingly rich and diverse body of material to argue that the 'culture of death' so prevalent in the years of Japan's total war was in fact a work in progress, rooted in the earliest days of modern children's magazines. Adults, as they always do, transferred their aspirations, fears, and biases directly to children through the narratives they created for entertainment. In doing so, they provide us with a different view of Japan's modern history, centring on war, as it might have been seen through the eyes of children.

The culpability of adults in creating a manly world of sacrificial death and unquestioning loyalty is clear. Their motives are less so. Until the late 1930s no writer or publisher was compelled to produce these kinds of stories. Even during the worst years of censorship from 1941 onward, children's media contributors retained a degree of relative freedom not enjoyed by those who produced media for adults. Perhaps we can say with the great Arab philosopher Ibn Khaldun that they were as much a product of their times as they were of their fathers.

The last half of the 19th century through the interwar years were times of nation-building, based in part on reinventing traditions from a usable past. War and its remembrances were integral to this process, driven by a social Darwinian worldview of struggle and conflict. In Japan, as elsewhere, this world was almost exclusively a masculine one. With very few exceptions, men have initiated and prosecuted war. They have also developed the tools of war from which nations and empires have been forged. From the stirrup and the long bow to napalm and the atomic bomb, men have been the principal agents in creating the technologies of war. In the modern world these technologies, to borrow Marx's phrase, 'weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the living'.

Men also created the print media technologies that enabled generations of Japanese 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 modern history and the development of its own nationalist 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. ◀

Owen Griffiths teaches Japanese and Asian History at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, Canada. His interests include the history of the black market, the problem of forgetting in historical writing, and the centrality of war and its remembrances in national discourse. Please see the online version at www.iias.nl for full source citation.
ogriffit@mta.ca