

**SPECIAL SECTION, edited by Nobuko Toyosawa**

**Auxiliaries of Empire: Children, Foot Soldiers, and Settlers in Japanese Imperial History**

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## INTRODUCTION

# Imperial Residue: Ambiguous Imperialists and Their Cultural Production

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In 2025, eighty years will have passed since the unconditional surrender of Japanese armed forces on 15 August 1945. Today, historians and journalists who narrate the story of the Japanese Empire employ a great deal of historical evidence produced during and after the war, including interviews, memoirs and recollections, monuments, films, and organizational publications, which are deployed alongside primary sources left by the Japanese state, colonial government authorities, and non-state actors in order to narrate the story of this empire.<sup>1</sup> These sources allow us to go beyond the national history of Japan's imperial past, offering cultural representations that provide us with glimpses of how individuals resident in or subject to the Japanese Empire lived their lives. They may also suggest to us how wartime experiences were carried over into the postwar, as the understandings of individuals and communities of their postwar situation were profoundly shaped by both their experiences and memories of what had come before.

This Special Section, entitled “Auxiliaries of Empire: Children, Foot Soldiers, and Settlers in Japanese Imperial History,” looks to shed new light on the “ambivalent imperialists” who, we argue, played a vital role in imagining, materializing, and legitimizing the Japanese Empire, even as they had little awareness of their involvement in such a grand enterprise. The existence of such individuals is rarely foregrounded in national histories, and the individuals examined here do not appear in grand narratives of Japanese history as major historical players. All are characterized by a seeming inability to control their own fate, and their voices and actions remain largely silent in the postwar historiography of the Japanese Empire. In this collection of articles, we bring such individuals under the microscope in order to analyze how they maintained agency while being undoubtedly complicit in Japan's

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1 Katō 2015, pp. 16–18; see also Narita 2020.

imperial enterprise, with the aim of better understanding both Japan's imperial past and how that past is understood today.

This section examines these imperial auxiliaries within an era of war and peace in twentieth-century East Asia in order to trace how these ordinary individuals took advantage of opportunities born out of international geopolitical transformations—war, colonization, and shifting state claims to legitimacy—to enable them to live their lives under the aegis of the Japanese Empire. By underscoring the myriad ways in which these lives intersected with imperialism, the micro-analysis conducted across these three articles foregrounds individuals who could be used to symbolize powerlessness, dependency, or political disconnection, yet whose presence was part of a project of legitimation undertaken by an expanding empire. Focusing particularly on the cultural expression of that presence, this section will contribute to historical understandings of Japan's empire and how it is understood today.

### Imperial History and Its Turns

Knowledge of Japan's empire today is shaped by broader trends within the study of imperialism and empires. The conceptualization of ambivalent imperialists reflects a series of historiographical developments concerning Japan's place within a global imperial history. In the study of imperialism, modern world history from the nineteenth to twentieth centuries is known as the age of high imperialism, largely in reference to the rise and fall of the British and French colonial empires that assembled external colonies for profit and prestige. Imperialism in Asia was not a crucial part of this global history of empires, and, thus, was treated as a response to Western colonial domination. It is now clear that this framework failed to fully recognize Japanese imperialism and the extent of its colonial violence. Japan's wartime aggression was justified in the name of defending the East from Western imperialism, yet it actively sought territorial expansion as a solution to the failures of capitalist modernity at home, with Japan's colonial agenda identified as the solution for the nation's domestic problems. Emerging as a result of unmanageable socioeconomic systems and political structures that pushed its people to support the colonization of Asia, the drive for Japanese territorial expansion and the creation of colonies was, therefore, justified in a similar fashion as in European empires.

In Japan, studies of Japanese colonialism (*shokuminchi kenkyū* 植民地研究) in the postwar era were initially conducted as one aspect of studies of imperialism (*teikokushugi kenkyū* 帝國主義研究), which examines the history of imperialism (*teikokushugishi* 帝國主義史) more broadly. A body of research on Japan's colonialism examining the Japanese Empire and its constituent territories as representing the empirical and historical outcome of imperialism in Asia reached a peak in the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> In the first decade of the twenty-first century, studies of Japanese colonialism began to segment into various fields, and the analytical focus shifted from the broader institutional structures of politics and economics to the behavior of individuals within colonized cultures and societies. An analysis increasingly centered on the subjectivity of the colonizers complicates the hitherto mainstream historiography, which largely operates within the binary of colonizer vs. colonized, giving rise to new types of research on empires (*teikoku kenkyū* 帝國研究) and new modes of imperial histories (*teikoku-shi* 帝國史).

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2 Nihon Shokuminchi Kenkyūkai 2018.

This new research on empires grants greater attention to the spaces created and defined by imperial political structures. These were spaces that were not only demarcated and administered by the imperial state, but within which people lived their lives. Scholars working in this mode are interested in observing that the exercise of power is not necessarily or solely top down, but operates in a reciprocal or multi-directional fashion within this imperial space. Such an imperial history signals a shift in the notion of sovereignty, as shown in scholarship on settler colonialism, consumerism, and mass culture in twentieth-century Japan.<sup>3</sup> The field has shifted from the history of Japanese imperialism, and towards a history of Japan's empire, with the emphasis on imperial culture directing our attention to the production of social life within the empire as being to some extent independent of, or at least autonomous from, state authority. This research has shown that the social and cultural spheres played a vital role in the presence and persistence of empire, irrespective of whether particular individuals identified or operated as imperialists or otherwise.

This Special Section is therefore interested in how a broader imperial space intersects with the colonial spaces inhabited by individuals, and how that comes to be reflected in the culture they produced. The attention now paid to these variegated imperial spaces reflects an imperial history that has been inflected through successive "imperial turns" in world history. These turns have sought to push the field to "turn from the study of domestic or national history toward a study of empire, thus complicating the presumed territorial, cultural, and political boundaries between empires and nations."<sup>4</sup>

New research on empires has thus sought to emphasize the actions and activities of individuals as independent of the state, recovering their autonomy. Historians have sought to pay more attention to the ways in which imperial subjects, those implicated within the broader structures of imperialism but not defined by it, pursued their lives. These subjects form social relations, develop networks of production and exchange, and exercise political agency within an imperial space, because empire also serves to frame these dimensions beyond the imperial state's role as the provider of infrastructure and social regulation. The three articles in this Special Section explore how a farmer-artist, writers, and the privileged imperial children of Japan's empire lived their lives within this imperial frame, which inevitably shaped the cultural artifacts they left behind.

### **Historical Background: Imperial Democracy and Imperial Culture**

This Special Section is particularly interested in the lived space of individuals in the Japanese Empire. It focuses on how individuals experienced imperial life, particularly as this experience came to be mediated by and through their cultural activities, and what those activities have left for us today. This is a rich area for further investigation, as Japan in the early twentieth century is vividly associated with a lively consumer mass culture before the rise of militarism.<sup>5</sup> Many Japanese were aspiring "modern" people in the years between the world wars, with modernity having strong associations "with technological progress, mass communication, rapid urbanization, consumerism, cosmopolitanism, self-indulgence,

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance Duus 1995; Young 1998; Harootunian 2000; Sato 2003; Silverberg 2006; Tierney 2010; Uchida 2011; O'Dwyer 2015; Chatani 2018; Uchiyama 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Ghosh 2012, p. 772.

<sup>5</sup> Dower et al. 2012; Uchiyama 2019; Vlastos 1998; Young 2013.

iconoclasm, diversity, and dissent.”<sup>6</sup> The popular obsession with pleasure and consumption in Japan, vividly depicted in, for example, the floating world of *ukiyo-e* in the early modern period, would also find its reflection in the attention granted to pleasure and consumption in the interwar period. Yet this interwar emphasis on popular culture was now one embraced by an ever bigger and broader audience. Cultural producers and consumers now included those considered to have had less access to, or at least less of a role in shaping and producing, the culture of earlier eras, such as women, or those in the countryside. In particular, the emergence of an urban femininity reflecting women’s desires distinguished modern popular culture from that of the previous era.<sup>7</sup> Culture was valuable to many people’s lives, and individuals strove to acquire it as best as they could. This cultural and intellectual vibrancy of prewar Japan was also shared by the ambiguous imperialists addressed in these three articles.

Nevertheless, there remained a significant gap between city and countryside, which gave rise to a proletarian movement in the 1920s that aimed to direct public attention to the socially weak and exploited, as well as to fervent public support for emigration programs, most notably the “Millions to Manchuria” campaign in the 1930s.<sup>8</sup> Different temporalities appeared to exist, and Japanese intellectuals in the 1930s saw the widening socioeconomic gaps in the country as evidence of cultural degeneration resulting from excessive Westernization and the problems of industrial capitalism. They began to idealize a preindustrial past and dreamed of returning to a state before capitalism and modernity. By the late 1930s, modernity meant the “division, disunity, and fragmentation” of society, which would be overcome through territorial expansion and imperial competition. Pleasure-seeking activities, such as cafés, movie theaters, department stores, and the fashions associated with districts like Ginza, increasingly signified threats to the social order.<sup>9</sup> Instead, in the 1940s, fanatical phrases used to characterize the militaristic fervor of the Japanese people began to emerge, most famously the “one hundred million hearts beating as one” (*ichioku isshin* 一億一心).

Phrases like this give the impression that, guided by the state, the populace wholeheartedly supported the war. Undoubtedly imperial subjects did support the war effort under an authoritarian militaristic government, especially after the outbreak of the Asia-Pacific War in December 1941.<sup>10</sup> However, as these three articles reveal, imperial subjects were also busily engaged with making their own life decisions, with or without reference to the state. Indifference to state authorities allowed them to focus on their respective careers and lives. However, they continued to operate within a space of empire, meaning that they, too, were ultimately forced to comply with and serve the broader imperial structures within which they were imbricated. The articles in this section therefore engage with questions of how individuals dealt with state-induced violence, what they made out of their experiences, and how their actions might change our perception of the Japanese Empire.

One of the reasons this Special Section is concerned with interrogating the role of involuntary participants in the Japanese Empire today is that scholarly attention to

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6 Dower et al. 2012, p. 11.

7 Dower et al. 2012, p. 20; Minichiello 1998; Sato 2003; Silverberg 2006.

8 Young 1998. See also Field 2009; Field and Bowen-Struyk 2016; Tierney 2015.

9 Harootunian 2000, p. 30.

10 Kushner 2005.

the historic role played by people like our ambiguous imperialists remains scant.<sup>11</sup> One explanation for this negligence is the empire's sudden death, which had a profound impact on the consciousness of Japanese people in the postwar era—they were thrown into a state of “*kyodatsu*” 虚脱 (despondency), to borrow John Dower's term.<sup>12</sup> The country came immediately under the authority of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) until 1952, while it was other authorities that determined the future course of the former colonies. Despite the vast numbers of Japanese forced to return at the close of the war, including about 3,500,000 Japanese civilians, of whom 3,000,000 had been residing in Japan's quasi- and official colonies of Manchukuo and Kwantung Province, the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, and Southern Sakhalin before Japan's defeat, there has been no attempt to officially document the history of returnees (*bikiagesha* 引揚者) in postwar Japan.<sup>13</sup> Plans for a comprehensive history of returnees (including their local history) by the Ministry of Health and Welfare (today the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare) resulted only in a history of the institutional support and policies introduced for them in the postwar era.<sup>14</sup> As with soldiers who returned to Japan from imperial battlegrounds, these evacuees remained present as symbolic reminders of Japan's failure in the postwar era, and consequently their histories and memories were passed over by official attempts to detach the nation's imperial past from its peace-loving present. It goes without saying that their wartime experiences are, however, the vital source of historical investigation today that helps us understand the nature and identity of the Japanese Empire as a colonial and multiethnic empire.

### East Asia's Imperial History Today

The historical circumstances and historiographical shifts outlined above also help us to better understand the persistence and complexity of the Japanese Empire's presence in the present.<sup>15</sup> It has recently been emphasized that it is precisely the complexity of decolonization in Asia that demands further interrogation of Japan's imperial era.<sup>16</sup> That this is an ongoing process is apparent from the Japanese public's amnesia over their imperial past and the political performances of the Japanese government and neighboring nations over Japan's war responsibility that occurs every summer around August 15. The media presentation of debates over war responsibility gives the impression that it has become a diplomatic agenda to be discussed between national leaders. Nevertheless, how do the terms of the debate change if we consider the entire Japanese Empire involved in state violence in one way or another, and, consequently, that everyone's actions had consequences for the existence of the empire? Even if settlers from Japan emigrated as a result of their circumstances at home and were not directly involved in the business of empire abroad, as with immigrants to Manchuria and elsewhere, they were nevertheless imperialists and colonizers who benefited

11 Ōkubo 2023.

12 Dower 2000, p. 72.

13 It is noteworthy that the number of overseas Japanese residents exceeded the number of French or Italian civilians in their respective colonies around the globe. See Katō 2020.

14 Consequently, the local histories of returnees depended on their regional associations, and the experiences compiled remained within a narrow range, epitomized by the twenty-volume publication of the Heiwa Kinen Jigyō Tokubetsu Kikin 1991–2010.

15 Araragi et al. 2022a; Araragi et al. 2022b; Ching 2001; Igarashi 2000; Narita 2001; Yoneyama 1999; Fujitani et al. 2001.

16 Kushner and Muminov 2016; Kushner and Muminov 2019; Kushner and Levidis 2020.

from its existence, and thus legitimized it. These individuals participated in the structures of Japanese control over northeast China, even if they themselves were unaware of their role in wider structures of exploitation.

In this regard, it is worth remembering and emphasizing that the historiographical shift that has taken place in the study of Japan's empire was largely enabled by research exchange and collaboration with foreign scholars. This is the result of better access to historical materials since the 1990s, which occurred following the rapid democratization of politics in Taiwan and South Korea, as well as reforms in China. Particularly in the 2010s, research on the Japanese Empire and imperialism led to international conferences and workshops. This Special Section aims to fit and enrich this genre of imperial history with the hope of promoting further international dialogue about Japan's imperial past.

### **Synopsis of the Special Section**

The contributors to this section show the contradictions that appeared in Japanese society in the first three decades of the twentieth century resulting from its pursuit of capitalist modernity. The respective encounters—a young soldier's experience of the Siberian Intervention, aspiring Japanese writers in Manchukuo, and settler children who were born and grew up in Japan's colony of Korea—are notably ambiguous, and each contributor wrestles with the motivations that prompted their subjects' compliance with the violence that supported and underpinned the Japanese Empire.

The first article, "From the Ground Up: Japan's Siberian Intervention of 1918–1922 from the Perspective of Infantryman Takeuchi Tadao" by Nadine Willems, focuses on a rank-and-file soldier of the Imperial Japanese Army. Willems explores the experience of the conscripted farmer Takeuchi, who was in Siberia for six months in 1920, through the visual narrative he recorded. During his service in Siberia, Takeuchi kept a diary accompanied by vivid illustrations, which is colored by his interpretation of the conflict. Seeing the Siberian Intervention from below, these images display the threats he faced—Russian armies, but also local resistance, cold weather, and a lack of food. While historians have narrowly analyzed the Siberian Intervention as a strategic and political failure of the Japanese Army, Takeuchi's depiction enriches our understanding by revealing both the suffering experienced by soldiers, and their grave skepticism towards the authorities that controlled their fate. The article also notes the particular discordance between peace at home and war abroad, and reveals the cultural capital held by this young farmer soldier, in the form of his artistic techniques, rich imagination, and critical analysis of the military engagement in which he was engaged. These are valuable social and cultural historical findings unearthed by Willems through her interrogation of a major geopolitical event in the early twentieth century.

Willems' analysis of Takeuchi's visual narrative complicates the identification of Japanese soldiers with Japanese colonialism. Obviously, this does not place Takeuchi in the same category as victims of Japanese colonialism, yet like them, Takeuchi was unable to openly display his disagreement with the dictates of the imperial state and its representatives. His pictures clearly reveal a growing skepticism towards his commanding officers, for their lack of military strategic ability and their sheer arrogance, unworthy of respect, and implicates them within the failed actions that took numerous lives of his fellow combatants. They also expose the absence of military vision in a mission ostensibly driven only by the

desire for military prestige, at home and abroad. Willems' contribution rescues the subaltern autonomy of the lower ranks in the Japanese military, with the likes of Takeuchi unable to resist their commanding officers, but keen to document the critical factors that led to the ultimate failure of the Japan's Siberian Intervention, and thus its status as a "forgotten war" in Japanese history.

The tendency to forget failure is also one that runs through the second article, "Culture under Imperialism: *Geibun* and the Production of Manchurian Literature" by Nobuko Toyosawa. This analyzes how a group of Japanese writers living in Manchuria sought to contribute to the development of Manchurian "national" literature, a movement culminating in the publication of the comprehensive cultural magazine *Geibun*. The role of these writers is understudied by comparison with the elite writers, such as Kawabata Yasunari, who closely aligned with official cultural propaganda. Toyosawa explores how writers like Ōuchi Takao and Akihara Katsuji persisted in their efforts to produce a "national" literature that reflected a distinct Manchurian identity, one characterized by egalitarianism, agricultural life, and the unyielding spirit of its inhabitants in the vast yet harsh Manchurian environment.

Despite the initial aims of these writers, it proved impossible for them to remain true to their original goals when mobilization for total war began, and their work increasingly aligned with the imperial state's vision for a Greater East Asian literature. The article argues that their sincere efforts were unable to overcome the mimetic limitations of culture within imperialism, which Toyosawa demonstrates through a textual analysis of a short story published in *Geibun*'s final issue. The impossibility of creating cultural representations not in accord with the structures of Japanese control resulted in the literary imagination of these writers staying within the imperialist ideology of ethnic harmony that valorized the primacy of Japan. The failure of their efforts was subsequently subsumed into the failure of Manchukuo and the Japanese Empire as a whole, and many of these former Japanese Manchurian writers remained silent about their literary careers in Manchuria after they returned to Japan after the war.

Clearly, these writers were complicit with and benefitted from Japanese imperialism, but the article also stresses that their ambivalent relationship with Japanese authority distances them from the state. Perhaps paradoxically, their literary enthusiasm, striving to overwrite official wartime cultural propaganda in the name of Manchurian literature, should also be understood as a means by which imperial culture spread, and Toyosawa's article provides us with insights into how it was that culture operates under imperialism.

The complicated relation between individual actions within the Japanese Empire and their postwar remembrance is also central to the section's third article, Kyrie Vermette's "Not only a Child: The Vulnerability and Complicity of Japanese Settler Girls in Colonial Korea." This focuses on the childhoods of two Japanese settler girls growing up in Japan's colony of Korea, and the remembrance and memorialization of those childhoods in postwar Japan following its defeat. Through her detailed analysis of the two memoirs based on these childhoods, Vermette articulates how settler girls were both vulnerable and complicit in Japan's imperial project. Settler children, and particularly girls, rarely receive scholarly attention as agents of imperialism due to assumptions of their ignorance and powerlessness. However, their entanglements with the structures and mobilities of empire means that these minors were inevitably drawn into colonial systems of power.

This does not make them responsible for Japanese colonialism, but the layers of settler colonial systems that surrounded their lives could not help but implicate these girls within it. Dependent on their parents, and molded by colonial systems of schooling, these girls learned to obey what adults said and decided for them. And yet, as Vermette details, this did not guarantee that their emotions remained in line with imperial demands: the departure of a brother for military service made them mourn, rather than proud of, the separation, for instance. Likewise, being born and raised in Korea, these children developed a strong emotional attachment to Korea as their home, rather than mainland Japan, an attachment fostered by the intense feelings for and memories of the intimate contacts they had with those who took care of them—mothers, nannies, housemaids—all of whom were associated with Korea rather than Japan. As such, they rejected the values and norms that Japanese settler colonialism in Korea sought to impose, which shaped their complex identity as settler children who were both Korean and Japanese, entangled with Japanese colonization.

Vermette's deployment of memoirs allows for an analysis of the ways in which the everyday lives of these children intersected with the broader settler colonial systems, but also reflects their authors' own postwar reflections on these same intersections. It is noteworthy that the publication of personal witness accounts of the war emerged in postwar Japan in reaction to major government decisions and policies about official compensation policies for veterans and expat Japanese. The sheer number of individual and organizational publications in the 1950s and 1960s offers a window into how the postwar legacies of the empire, both in domestic politics and in international relations, included efforts to recover specific aspects of Japan's empire in order to maintain the social and geopolitical order.<sup>17</sup> However, this initial flood of memoirs should also be seen as a form of resistance to the state, a means of signaling an absence of accord with the state's efforts of narration. The recounting of the traumatic events experienced by individuals both during the war and in its aftermath shows the gap existing between personal and official understandings of that experience.<sup>18</sup>

Each of these three articles explores the lives and activities of individuals who have received comparatively little attention in postwar historiography—those forgotten or dismissed due to a lack of authority. By integrating their voices back into the national historical narrative, a more complete understanding of Japanese imperial history will emerge to reduce the gap between official narratives and personal memories. The Japanese Empire had a profound personal impact on people implicated in its structures and on the receiving end of its violence; it is time to direct our attention to individual experience in order to better understand the nature of Japanese colonialism, imperialism, and war.

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17 Katō 2015, pp. 19–24.

18 Bull and Ivings 2019 detail how this gap operates in the case of repatriation to Maizuru.



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