Book Review

Kenkoku University and the Experience of Pan-Asianism: Education in the Japanese Empire

By Yuka Hiruma-Kishida

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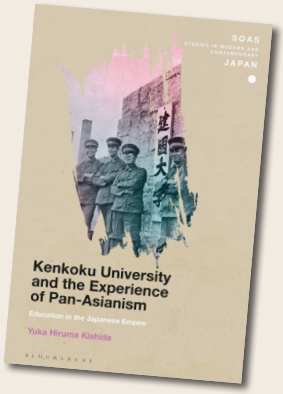
272 pages.



Reviewed by Christopher W. A. SZPILMAN

Yuka Hiruma-Kishida's *Kenkoku University* is the first ever book-length study in English of the Nation Building University (Kenkoku Daigaku, hereafter Kendai). It would be easy to dismiss the 1937 founding of this university in the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo as a Japanese ploy to court public opinion, but, as Hiruma-Kishida shows, such a view would be simplistic. True, some of its founders wanted the university to be a mere propaganda tool, but, as Hiruma-Kishida argues, it was inspired more by pan-Asian idealism than by cynical calculations.

The university was the brainchild of Colonel (later Lieutenant General) Ishiwara Kanji, known for his leading role in the so-called Manchurian Incident of September 1931, staged to provide the Japanese army with a pretext to occupy Manchuria, where they would set up Manchukuo. Ishiwara was a military thinker (though to describe him as a "philosopher" [p. 19] as Hiruma-Kishida does, is going too far), a follower of a sect of Nichiren Buddhism and a pan-Asianist visionary. It was Ishiwara's pan-Asianism that inspired him to advocate the founding of a university, where young men from Manchuria, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, China, and other areas of Asia would study together. Such a university, he thought, would help turn Manchukuo into "the showcase of Pan-Asian unity and a model for the political alliance, the East Asian league, of Asian nations against the West" (p. 23). To reflect such pan-Asian aspirations, Ishiwara wanted to call it "Asia University."

But this was not to be. Conservative scholars appointed as members of a board to plan the new university preferred Shinto and "the imperial way" to Ishiwara's "ethnic harmony" and Asian brotherhood. The university, in their view, should train administrators of Manchukuo (p. 27), not pursue pan-Asian ideals. Accordingly, the new institution would be called the "Nation Building University."

This conservative distortion of Ishiwara's vision did not stifle pan-Asian idealism among the university's faculty and students, but, as Hiruma-Kishida notes, their idealism was not always egalitarian. Many Japanese professors and students, though subscribing to pan-Asianism, took Japanese superiority for granted. Only Japan, they insisted, could unite Asia, and the first step to achieve this lofty goal would be to raise the "inferior" Chinese and Manchurians "to the level of the Japanese" (p. 67). Yet such ethnic arrogance did not deter some non-Japanese faculty from professing their love for Japan (p. 45), even if they were

not altogether comfortable with the Japanese claims of ethnic or cultural superiority. These declarations of love for Japan were not, it appears, made out of fear or through coercion, since other faculty members, Japanese and non-Japanese, could be and often were critical of Japanese policies.

The students' views were just as diverse as the faculty's. Some non-Japanese students, it seems, supported the war effort; others remained undecided; and others still, though probably a minority for most of Kendai's existence, engaged in various forms of resistance. Pan-Asian ideals of Japanese students were affected by their daily contact with non-Japanese students. Such exchanges produced mixed results, making some Japanese students even more arrogant, while leading others to question the official hierarchical version of pan-Asianism. This diversity of views was possible partly because the economist Sakuta Shōichi (appointed vice president in 1939), and most other professors, though conservative, generally tolerated freedom of expression. There was markedly less tolerance after Sakuta was forced to resign in the wake of the arrest of several Chinese students for anti-Japanese activities in 1942. His replacement, Lieutenant General Suetaka Kamezō, tried to run the university like an army barracks, but even such a heavy-handed approach failed to suppress free expression completely.

In fact, it was during Suetaka's term in office that resistance by non-Japanese students intensified. At one point in late 1943, Hiruma-Kishida states, some twenty-four Kendai students were imprisoned for alleged "political crimes" (p. 135). In many cases, however, students objected not to Japanese rule as such, but to arbitrary acts by the Japanese authorities, notably the 1942 appointment of Suetaka and the 1943 replacement of regular university instruction with military training.

The existence of Kendai was brought to an abrupt end by the Soviet attack on Japan on 9 August 1945. Japan's surrender and the subsequent return of Manchuria to China did not, however, extinguish the Kendai legacy. Japanese graduates did not have to hide their Kendai background, and back in Japan some of them pursued successful careers in diplomacy, business, and the media. By contrast, Chinese and Korean alumni thought it prudent not to advertise their Kendai past, at least initially. In the more relaxed climate of the 1990s, however, there was no need for such discretion: reminiscences were published and contact between them and Japanese alumni were reestablished. This strongly suggests that the Japanese efforts to promote Asian solidarity in Manchukuo via education were not entirely fruitless. As Hiruma-Kishida notes, the Kendai legacy also lives on institutionally. Changchun University can be regarded as Kendai's heir. It was founded in the 1990s through the joint efforts of Chinese and Japanese Kendai alumni, and it is located on what used to be the Kendai campus.

Drawing on a wide range of contemporary sources, reminiscences, and interviews, Hiruma-Kishida shows that the ideological complexity of Manchukuo defies any simplistic generalizations. She also sheds light on the contradictions between nationalism and pan-Asianism which even the most idealistic pan-Asianists found difficult to overcome.

Unfortunately the book has some weaknesses. One of these is Hiruma-Kishida's tendency to take various statements at face value, as in her discussion of Ishiwara's views. Ishiwara's thought, shaped largely by his Nichiren Buddhism and Confucianism, was apocalyptic. Peace, he prophesied, would only prevail on earth after a series of devastating conflicts, which Japan, in pursuit of its "global mission as a world savior," would win in a

final conflagration against the United States (pp. 19–20). Such madcap notions make it easy to see why his pan-Asianism was "rooted in a sober conviction that militarism was essential to the future of Japan" (p. 19), but they are difficult to reconcile with Ishiwara's allegedly egalitarian pan-Asianism, especially as he maintained that there existed "a hierarchy of civilizations" (p. 21). All this makes one wonder whether, as Hiruma-Kishida suggests, Ishiwara's vision of Kendai, if realized, would have been better than the conservative vision that actually prevailed.

The book moreover should have been edited more carefully. The publishing house's correct name is Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, not Yoshikawa Hirobumi kan (p. 198, p. 247); Sakuta's given name is Shōichi, not Sōichi; and Naitō Konan should not have a macron over the second "o" (p. 9, p. 200). These reservations apart, Hiruma-Kishida's book is a valuable contribution that should not be ignored by any serious student of the history of Manchukuo, Japanese colonial policy, pan-Asianism, or the history of Japanese education.