

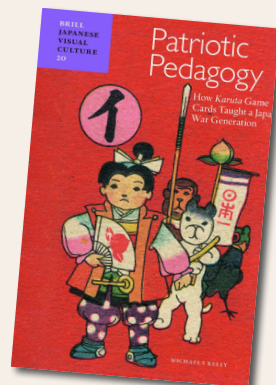
BOOK REVIEW

Patriotic Pedagogy: How Karuta Game Cards Taught a Japanese War Generation

By Michaela Kelly

Brill, 2022
224 pages.

Reviewed by Peter CAVE



In this beautifully produced volume, Michaela Kelly introduces twenty-three sets of *karuta* game cards, the vast majority produced during the 1931–1945 period that is often called the Fifteen Years War in Japan. Through detailed analysis of the words and pictures on the cards, she explicates the largely imperialistic and war-focused messages they communicated to the children (and adults) who used them. She also contextualizes the cards in relation to the *karuta* tradition in Japan, other media aimed at children in the period, and educational movements in Taishō and early Shōwa. In so doing, she makes a valuable contribution to understanding adult attempts to shape the worlds of twentieth-century Japanese children.

The book is composed of a prologue and introduction, four chapters, and an epilogue. Chapter 1 briefly introduces the history and use of *karuta* cards. Chapter 2 shows how teachers and educationalists developed *karuta* as a pedagogical tool after World War I. This is placed within the context of the development of Japanese education, pedagogy, and views of childhood from Meiji through to World War II. The chapter points to the increasing dominance of the state-centered view of children as “little citizens” (*shōkokumin*) as war intensified, and the corresponding efforts to shape children in this mold. Chapter 3 frames wartime *karuta* as “educational propaganda,” comparing them with manga of the same period, such as the popular *Norakuro* series about a dog who has comic adventures in a company of canine soldiers. Kelly analyzes texts and images from different *karuta* sets to explicate the (stereotyped) identities they portray: the superiority and beneficence of imperializing Japan, the soldier as an ideal, the ridiculous inferiority of Japan’s (mainly Chinese) enemies, and the good child citizen. Chapter 4 elaborates further on particular themes in wartime *karuta*: gender roles, the training-accented understanding of education encapsulated in the wartime term *rensei* 錬成, and the portrayal of Japan, its colonies, and the wider world. The chapter also discusses the new anthology of *One Hundred Patriotic Poems* (*Aikoku hyakunin isshu*) produced by the government-backed Japanese Literature Patriotic Association in 1942 in imitation of the traditional *Ogura hyakunin isshu*. Kelly explains how the anthology was produced, and analyzes the poem selection, including detailed analysis of particular poems. The epilogue sums up the findings of the study and provides some interesting contemporary examples of *karuta* being used for educational and

propagandistic purposes, such as inspiring interest in local dialects or Japan's claims to the four southernmost Kuril Islands.

Besides the lavish color illustrations of cards that are analyzed, the book also contains five “interleaf” sections, covering over fifty pages in all. Each provides a color reproduction of an entire *karuta* set (or in one case, syllabary blocks). These provide a wonderful resource for both research and teaching. Many of the cards in the book are held in the archives of Lafayette College, Pennsylvania.¹

This is a work of meticulous scholarship, which provides a fascinating window into significant and little-studied cultural artifacts, and in so doing, illuminates attempts to shape the worlds of children in imperial Japan. I would like to suggest some points that I think it raises for further consideration.

First, near the end of the book (pp. 180–181), Kelly rightly notes that the main market for these mostly high quality and so relatively expensive cards would have been better-off families, especially in urban areas. This helps to explain why cards tend to depict civilians wearing decidedly middle-class apparel. I would further suggest that the cards portray what might be called an ideal of “imperial modernity.” Japan is presented as a land of empire, but also of modernity—of cars, trains, planes, warships, uniformed schoolchildren, modern buildings, education, and organizations. Indeed, empire and modernity are presented as a seamless whole.

A second point is the question of how unusual Japan was in portraying empire positively. Kelly does provide some international contextualization for the use of children's games in relation to war, but such comparisons could be extended. There is a significant amount of scholarship on the favorable presentation of the British Empire in the nineteenth-thirties, for example, including not only by British but also Hollywood cinema.² Was Japan abnormal among imperial nations?

The third point centers on the relationship between education and propaganda. Kelly is unpersuaded—I think rightly—by definitions that try to distinguish the two. Nonetheless, she continues to use the term “propaganda” in a pervasively pejorative way, ending the book with an exhortation to “eschew educational propaganda in favor of a future of peace” (p.183). She clearly implies that the use of propaganda is wrong, at least when directed at children. I have to admit that I find this somewhat naïve, especially given Kelly's own definition of propaganda as “a cultural artifact . . . that directly or symbolically expresses a particular bias (political or social), and created or deployed *with the intent* to deceive, influence, or evoke a particular emotional or physical response in a person” (p. 78). We may agree that intentional deception is wrong, but all cultural artifacts are inevitably selective in the “truth” they portray. This would apply to any cultural artifact that seeks to evoke a response regarding any matter of debate—including, to take contemporary examples, gender, sexuality, or climate. Are all such artifacts “propaganda” and therefore bad? Or only the ones we disagree with? If the latter, “propaganda” simply becomes a boo word that might itself be termed propagandistic, since it seems designed to evoke a response prior to thought. For these reasons, I am not persuaded that the use of “propaganda” as a major analytic category

1 The archives can be accessed at <https://exhibits.lafayette.edu/s/karuta/page/welcome>.

2 MacKenzie 1986.

is helpful here. The messages and intentions of artifacts can be analyzed, and criticized, without the term. However, this suggestion should not detract from Kelly's fine study.

REFERENCE

MacKenzie 1986

John M. MacKenzie, ed. *Imperialism and Popular Culture*. Manchester University Press, 1986.