

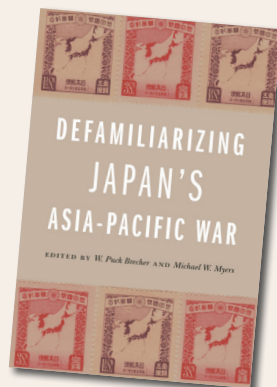
BOOK REVIEW

Defamiliarizing Japan's Asia-Pacific War

Edited by W. Puck Brecher and Michael W. Myers

University of Hawai'i Press, 2019
244 pages.

Reviewed by Zachary LONG



Defamiliarizing Japan's Asia-Pacific War, an edited volume by Puck Brecher and Michael W. Myers, sets out with the goal of “refreshing and reorienting history” (p. 13) through a series of chapters focused broadly on three major narratives: that of a unified, homogenous Japan, the Asia-Pacific War as an illegal war, and depictions of the Asia-Pacific War as a race war. The chapters look to unsettle general understandings of the war by detailing underexplored histories or presenting new information that complicates these narratives.

The opening chapter by Kazufumi Hamai and Peter Mauch address the “oft-told tale” of the “willful destruction of official Japanese records in the dying days of the Second World War” (p. 30). The chapter contextualizes this in two ways: first, by detailing the means through which official records were meticulously produced, maintained, and protected throughout the Meiji, Taisho, and Showa periods, and thus how the depredation of the record during the war, through fires, the Allied bombings, and intentional incineration, was exceptional. Second, it outlines various efforts undertaken after the war to publish the existing diplomatic record, either under Allied auspices in the case of the *Gaikō shiryō* diplomatic document series in 1946, or, immediately after the occupation, the more broadly focused *Shūsen shiroku* (Historical records of the ending of the war) in 1952. Additionally, it describes the ongoing process of making these records available to scholars and the public over the years, culminating in their digitization in recent decades.

Yoneyuki Sugita undercuts common narratives of a “clean break” (p. 34) between prewar and postwar Japan by looking at the example of medical insurance programs. The chapter describes the national healthcare system in Japan from its beginnings in 1922, its steady expansion in coverage, and its transformation into a fully-fledged public assistance program in 1946, highlighting both continuities and ruptures in the health care regime.

M. W. Shores explores the variety of responses of *rakugo* writers and performers when asked to deliver acts with militaristic or nationalist themes. The primary contrast drawn is between the more traditional Osaka-based *rakugo* performers on one side, and Tokyo *rakugo* and the Yoshimoto Co.'s *manzai* performers on the other. While the latter were increasingly patronized by the state for publication and live shows, both at home and overseas, the

former found themselves marginalized for refusing to alter their traditional repertoire to meet wartime demands.

Annika A. Culver uses care packages, *imon bukuro*, to explore mass mobilization, how such objects helped bridge the distance between the battlefield and the home front, and “the linkages between gender and commercialization in Japan at war and its empire” (p. 86). Through an examination of advertisements and announcements of collections for packages in the *Asahi Shinbun*, the chapter shows how the practice ebbed and flowed before petering out due to diminishing resources at the end of the war, with the final article on the subject appearing in the paper on 13 January 1945 (p. 99).

Florentino Rodao sheds light on the underexplored history of Japan’s complex relations with various neutral states, including Spain, Portugal, Turkey, and Sweden. The chapter describes the various types of neutrality these states maintained vis-à-vis Japan leading up to 1945, and the shifts in relations which occurred due to the defeat of Germany, as countries began to respond to the likely outcome of the conflict. Of particular interest is the active role of both Japan and the various neutral states in attempting to refine relations with one another in response to broader shifts in the international situation.

Michael W. Myers addresses one of the most pervasive narratives in modern Japanese history: the presumed inevitability of Allied victory in the Pacific. Myers shows that much of this narrative was constructed with the benefit of hindsight and no small dose of Allied propaganda, asserting that contemporary observers on both sides remained uncertain about the outcome of the war until its final moments, and that, moreover, Japan’s strategic goals were realistic when they were conceived in 1941. This chapter is one of the volume’s most provocative, and grapples directly with a dominant narrative that drives much of the professional and popular history surrounding the Asia-Pacific War.

Yumi Murayama provides a counterpoint to the history of religious organizations being forced by the weight of surveillance and coercion into cooperation with the government, focusing on the contributions of Yanaihara Tadao (1893–1961) as a Christian intellectual and scholar of colonial policy. The chapter shows how Yanaihara wove criticism of colonial policy and biblical narratives together in order to produce withering assessments of Japan’s actions. The focus on his use of biblical references as a means to criticize government policy opens up a space for seeing religion during this period as not merely being forced into compliance or silenced by the state.

The final two chapters provide complementary viewpoints on the issue of race during wartime Japan. They argue that “the presence of Nisei, Eurasians, colonial subjects and other ambiguous populations ... required the Japanese authorities to re-examine the concept of Japaneseness” (p. 185), although the factors they emphasize are distinct. A. Carly Buxton writes that race and gender were decisive for how a given individual was treated, whereas W. Puck Brecher argues that nationality-based criteria were strictly maintained. The latter’s history of mixed-race experiences in wartime Japan engages directly with John Dower’s *War Without Mercy* and its claims that the war in the Asia-Pacific was a “race war,” pointing out the limits of such a perspective and providing concrete examples of what it misses.

The introduction to the volume acknowledges that the chapters are “thematically and methodologically ... diverse,” (p. 1) but they collectively serve to “defamiliarize” the Asia-Pacific War in its broadest sense, and invite further efforts to reexamine dominant historical narratives.