

Consuming empire in wartime Japan

Kenneth Ruoff has chosen a fascinating motif to study how the Japanese consumed empire, how they collaborated with their leadership in solidifying imperial myths, and how this contributed to justifying domestic order as well as expansion abroad. The celebration in 1940, of the 2600th anniversary of the mythical founding of Japan, undoubtedly represents a peak of imperial propaganda but has not been studied much. This “climactic moment for the ‘unbroken imperial line’ (*bansei ikkei*) ideology” (p.1), as Ruoff puts it, is one of those numerous events of tremendous significance in history that in post-war scholarship of Japan’s modern history have been overshadowed by the major political events of this era: the founding of Manchukuo in 1932, the second Sino-Japanese War (1937-45), the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, etc. We owe much to Ruoff for studying this event and the spectacle that was created to celebrate the anniversary of the assumed enthronement of Emperor Jimmu in 660 BC.

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Reviewed publication:

Ruoff, K.J. 2010.

Imperial Japan at its Zenith. The Wartime Celebration of the Empire's 2,600th Anniversary. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. 236 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8014-4866-9 (hardback)

BUT RUOFF does much more than this. His analysis of the ideological cum societal impact of the celebrations – with a clear focus on the latter – provide new insights into how these myths were infused with life and put into practice on different levels of society. Using four topical examples (historiography, mass culture, tourism, diaspora) and stretching the spatial range from Japan proper to Korea, Manchuria, and Japanese communities in the Americas, Ruoff manages to base his study on an unusually rich body of sources; they include political essays, maps, postcards, guidebooks, flags, songs and other materials that do not often feature in conventional works of historiography.

Touring empire, serving the throne

Ruoff clarifies early on his distance to the core message of imperial mythmaking, namely the historicity of the mythical emperor Jimmu who, as he puts it plainly “never existed” (p.1). It is only fair to admit that the military and political leadership did not invent this myth in the 1930s or 1940s, but merely activated and instrumentalized traditional beliefs and ideas on the given occasion. Many of the ideological ingredients of the imperial anniversary celebration of 1940 had in fact been around for several decades as national myths and most have been studied by Carol Gluck in her seminal book on Meiji ideology more than 25 years ago.¹

Ruoff’s study, however, is less concerned with the politico-intellectual history of imperial mythmaking and ideology than with analysing its practice. His preferred term is ‘consumption’, by which he means nothing more than the active and willing participation of ordinary Japanese in the commodification of imperial Japan’s central myth of *bansei ikkei*. Ruoff identifies pilgrimages to assumedly holy sites of the Japanese nation as central to this endeavour and it is therefore unsurprising that ‘tourism’ features as the most prominent way of consuming empire in his well-researched study. In fact, the actual anniversary celebrations are dealt with by the author in a few pages whereas three out of six chapters focus on Japanese traveling to and at ‘sacred sites’.



The first chapter studies how historians collaborated in the preparation of the anniversary celebrations and thereby helped to scholarly legitimize an otherwise rather obviously political project. While a number of studies of prominent Japanese historians

involved in different wartime projects have appeared in English over the past decades,² Ruoff is more interested in popular bestsellers and the mutually enforcing and dependent relationship between ideology and capitalism. “Wartime nationalism”, he writes, “intensified consumerism, which in turn hyped nationalism.” (p.4) The following chapter studies volunteer labour service which mobilized millions of Japanese ‘volunteers’ in preparation of the anniversary celebrations. This chapter is the key to Ruoff’s claim that the anniversary was no unilateral top-down propaganda event, but in fact a series of activities stretching over some years ahead of 1940 and involving mass participation, most of which was voluntary, as Ruoff claims.

Chapters three to five then shift the focus to what Ruoff calls “imperial tourism”, with foci on heritage sites in Japan, Korea, and Manchuria. On the one hand, Ruoff emphasizes that the massive success of wartime tourism suggests that wartime Japan was no “dark valley” of continuous and widespread suffering for most Japanese people, on the other hand, however, he sees “authoritarianism/militarism/fascism” (p.7) as the driving force behind the promotion of traveling as “self-administered citizenship training” (pp.12, 145). To what extent “imperial tourism”, often promoted and organized by the still existing Japan Tourism Bureau (JTB), was in fact coerced remains unclear. Ruoff’s implied similarities with Italian *Dopolavoro* and German *Kraft durch Freude* programmes – which themselves differed quite fundamentally³ – reveal the disparity rather than commonality of the three cases. Not the least of these differences appears to be linkages with welfare programmes in the European cases compared to the Japanese case in which commercial aspects seem to have outplayed the potential ideological character of tourism. The closing chapter then turns to the inclusion of Japanese diaspora and the anniversary celebrations of the Congress of Overseas Brethren in November 1940.

The axis of comparison: how fascist was Japan?

The width and diversity of the materials Ruoff managed to uncover is impressive and his skilful interweaving of historiographical argumentation and anecdotal evidence makes his book a very pleasant read. His basic thesis of stressing a mutually enforcing relationship between imperial propaganda, tourism, and consumption is convincing. However, there are also some problems; for example, when he frequently transcends the scope of Japanese history to place his findings in a larger context of assumed commonalities between Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and wartime Japan. Although Ruoff explicitly states that “[t]he value of the book does not rest on proving that fascism trumps all other concepts for understanding wartime Japan” (p.20), it is in fact this very analogy that Ruoff returns to throughout his study – with rather limited success. The parallels he likes to draw between German Nazism, Italian Fascism, and Japanese imperial propaganda surrounding the celebrations of 1940 appear constructed and misleading, at best, and are sometimes faulty. His consistent mistakes with German names and organisations (Leni Riefenstahl, not Reifenstahl; Heinrich, not Henrich Himmler; Bund Deutscher Mädel, not Madchen), which contrast unfavourably to his command over the Japanese materials, help little to strengthen his argument.

The main problems in this comparison are, however, not spelling mistakes. Apart from a very brief reference to the intellectual historian Maruyama Masao (who is only one of many Japanese scholars who have worked extensively on the problem of comparative fascism), there is no serious engagement with theoretical literature on fascism in a Japanese or global perspective.⁴ Is it sufficient to discover a few – assumed – parallels in mass movement activism and organisation between the Nazis and the Japanese to employ the label fascism? And what exactly does this label tell us? Are all organized mass movements fascist *per se*? How do democratic or non-fascist totalitarian regimes influence, organise, or manipulate masses?⁵

Ruoff’s case could have been more convincing had he either devoted some more space to discussing fascism as a potentially meaningful analytical concept or to studying events of similar size and significance as the 2600th Japanese imperial anniversary

in Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy. Only, as far as we know, there were none. And this, in fact, points at a unique feature of ‘fascist’ Japan that Ruoff, contrary to his own claims, accidentally discloses in a rather compelling way. In his conclusion, Ruoff correctly states that “[in Japan] there has been no explicit, official attempt to repudiate the imperial myths, contrivances that were employed during the past century and a half toward racist, imperialist, and sexist ends.” (p.188) This discomforting observation provides an important lead to seeing differences



between the three experiences beyond the oft-quoted problem of “coming to terms with the past”, namely the past itself. By the time the Nazis came to power, Japan’s empire was already stable; it had long annexed territory, possessed colonies, and secured a strong foothold on the Chinese mainland including the puppet-state of Manchukuo.

In other words, in the years leading up to the anniversary in 1940, the Japanese had experienced several decades of imperial propaganda, the usage of imperial myths, and mass activation for the sake of empire. Imperial symbolism and mass mobilization was not new and could, relatively easily, be stimulated. Unlike the German and Italian cases, it was not failed political figures and convicted criminals who transformed the state into a fascist prison. In Japan, it was military leaders who had won wars and had ‘successfully’ contributed to the expansion of the empire – victors, not losers. All these differences, not assumed fascist commonality, appear more relevant to understanding why and how imperial myths worked in Japan, and why they peaked when they did.

A practical inconvenience for the reader of this stimulating and important study is the publisher’s decision not to include a bibliography, not even a select bibliography. Maybe Ruoff was persuaded to agree to this deal as a trade-off for including more than a dozen full-colour prints of imperial propaganda materials that impressively visualize how the government, military, but also companies, tried to exploit the anniversary for their own purposes. They add to the pleasure of reading this insightful study that, as Ruoff’s previous monograph, has also appeared in Japanese translation. Despite the above-mentioned caveats, both versions deserve many readers.

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Notes

- 1 Gluck, C. 1985. *Japan's Modern Myths. Ideology in the Late Meiji Period*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- 2 For example Tanaka, S. 1993. *Japan's Orient. Rendering Pasts into History*, Berkeley: University of California Press; and Brownlee, John S. 1997. *Japanese Historians and the National Myths, 1600-1945*, Vancouver: UBC Press.
- 3 See De Grazia, V. 1981. *The culture of consent: mass organization of leisure in fascist Italy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 4 Maruyama, M. 1963. *Thought and behaviour in modern Japanese politics*, Ivan Morris (ed.), London: Oxford University Press, contains the classical study, while Tansman, A. (ed.) 2009. *The culture of Japanese fascism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, provides insights into recent debates.
- 5 A promising case study for comparison would be the promotion of tourism in post-1949 China. See <http://chineseposters.net/themes/tourism.php>



2600th year of Japanese Imperial Calendar stamps. Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications of Japan. (Wikimedia Commons)