

Showa Zatsuwa

Civilian Resistance in the Showa Era by W. Hale

While it is a common historical narrative to portray the Japanese people as eager, even fanatical, in their devotion to the Japanese empire and its military escapades, such a narrative ignores many important facets of civilian resistance, even at the height of 1920-30s pre-war fervour. As historians, we cannot allow an erroneous yet dominant narrative, however seductive, to go unchallenged, especially if there is clear evidence to the contrary. One such example emerged recently in the form of a trove of confiscated literature released by the Japanese Government, including anti-war magazines created during the Showa period.

Our topic today concerns one of these magazines, the underground literary publication *Showa Zatsuwa*, meaning roughly “Showa Chitchat”. Such an unassuming name belies the fact that all of its authors are kept anonymous due to the inflammatory and subversive nature of many of its contents. The image on the right, from the public digital archive, contains a story about a man who stumbles upon a shack whose owner declares himself king of the mountain, as a caution against pride. An innocuous tale, until you realise much of the shack-owners ramblings about his right to rule are lifted from the *Kyoiku Chokugo*,

a Japanese pledge of allegiance students were forced to recite promulgated by the government. Suddenly, a final line suggesting that “those who lack humility attract strong winds while being weak trees” becomes much more chilling. The final line informs us that it was written in three years before the Mukden incident that would serve as Japan’s self-made invitation to invade northern China.

Other common topics in the seven surviving issues of *Zatsuwa* include veiled political and historical commentary, various translations of Western works, as well as longer-form essays and short stories. All of these shared a distinct anti-imperial sentiment, and at least one Chinese and one American writer contributed articles in Chinese and English respectively, with translations printed afterwards.

In order to evade detection, several techniques were employed by the unknown publishers of the *Zatsuwa*. Many of their Sinologist or literature student contributors wrote in *kanbun*, a highly literary and archaic form of Japanese characterised by a strong relation with classical Chinese and a great distance from vernacular Japanese. A select few wrote in “restored text”, i.e. entirely using *kanji*, to further obfuscate their thoughts. The books were

printed in small batches and disseminated in private circles such as the Salon de thé François, a dissident’s café in Kyoto which also published its own anti-fascist newspaper, the *Doyōbi* (A similarly innocuous name, meaning “Saturday”).

Unfortunately, with the war reaching fever pitch and political, continued publication of the *Zatsuwa* quickly became near impossible. A police raid on their makeshift offices arrested seven people, at least one of which was accused of being a Communist and two others charged with violations of the *kokutai*, or national order.

Once the puppet state of Manchuko was established in Northern China, many idealistic scholars and reformists opted to serve there, hoping to create a government that would propagate liberal reforms back to Tokyo. Needless to say, these reforms never surfaced in the military-dominated puppet state. Nevertheless, *Zatsuwa* and its contemporaries stand as records of resistance in a hostile atmosphere, as tributes to the bravery and resilience contained in literature, and as grim reminders of what was once seemingly unchangeable reality.^H

Right: A surviving page from the first edition of *Showa Zatsuwa*, featuring a copy of the *Tale of the Mountain King*.

青山國者。在朝鮮以北。歷覽史籍所記。未有此國。吾爲行旅之人。游學關東諸國。乃過山下。雲霧晦冥。經歷數日。猶不知所在。吾欲速歸。故登其頂。仰望其下。見山腰以下有茅舍。吾走近茅舍。曰。我欲速歸關東。願與我行歸山下。舍主曰。君今日到訪青山國。朕爲青山國王。所以君爲朕臣民。不得通行。吾曰。青山國何在。舍主曰。青山國御殿在此。吾曰。茅舍御殿爲馬鹿。國王曰。青山國天壤無窮。八紘爲宇。國民義勇奉公。恭儉持已。朕肇國弘遠。樹德深厚。朕之訓言。子孫臣民所當俱遵守焉。通之古今而不謬。吾曰。汝夜郎自大。茅舍之主。何以爲國王。國王曰。君毋妄言。無禮無儀。無貴無賤。何其謬也。吾曰。正子有言。狂妄自大者。樹不大而招風也。王請度之。言未走之。昭和三年九月著。