**World War II’s Direct Influence on Japanese Literature**

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Introduction

History and literature have gone hand in hand together for several millennia. Throughout time, significant historical events have directly inspired authors to intertwine these events in their writing. A prime example of this is *Little Women* and *To Kill A Mockingbird*, which are both set within their respective time era’s and give an inside look to how life was in those time periods. These stories retell something from their time periods, through the lens of a different group. According to Monobe et al, “History is not just about historical figures and events in the past. History is also common memory created and owned by a particular group of people. Retelling and representing history contributes to the building of national and social identity of the people in a country (Hanke et al. [2013](https://www-tandfonline-com.mutex.gmu.edu/doi/full/10.1080/17400201.2020.1819216)).” (p. 4). Narratives vary depending on who is asked to tell the story. The United States has a definitive way of examining World War II, and their involvement with the Japanese military. Japan, likewise, has their own recollection of the war.

Manga has deliberately explored this by including influence of the war throughout their issues of manga. This is also the case for manga, a Japanese form of literature. Japan has a rich history that thrives on traditional values and culture. In the past two centuries, significant historical events like the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, have directly influenced manga artists in the 20th and 21st centuries. This essay will explore the question, ‘has Japan downplayed their war crimes in World War II through the spread of Japanese literature?’. Within the history discourse community, Japan has been a hot topic of discussion for decades. This essay intends to open the conversation even more, with a question to contribute to further discussions within the community. Japan has not downplayed the actions of their crimes through Japanese literature, and in fact manga has granted artists the opportunity to give a broader non-western perspective of the war.

Background Knowledge

While manga has become exceedingly popular within the last two decades, it has been around for much longer than that. In fact, despite its massive popularity now, manga is much older than the modern forms that we see commercialized today. Early manga looked like art forms drawn upon scrolls with what looked to be the earliest sighting of a ‘speech bubble’. According to Ryoko Matsuba et al., “Around the year 1200 AD, a humorous, anonymous artist produced a set of painted handscrolls that show rabbits and monkeys bathing in a river, frogs and rabbits wrestling, and other scenes where animals behave like humans. Known as the Handscrolls of Frolicking Animals (Chōjū giga), this work is considered by some to be the foundation of modern manga.”(Apa citation insert here). What has remained consistent about manga, is that it always utilizes art combined with words to tell a story. The piece entitled, *Handscrolls of Frolicking Animals*, shows exactly that. The artist creates a story for others on the scroll, utilizing his artistic talents and literary works. Manga, much like hieroglyphics and books like the bible has been used to pass down stories from generation to generation. Quite similarly, manga has also been utilized to pass down stories. The origins of manga found them to be painted onto scrolls, which evolved overtime to include multiple pages. Manga is an important part of Japanese pop culture that was cultivated and developed more because of World War II.

World War II’s Direct Influence on Manga

The stock market crash of October 28th, 1929 not only devastated the American economy, but the entire world. The aftereffects of these events altered the state of every country

in the world. Preceding World War II, Japan’s economy was stagnant, due to its long run as an isolationist country. Just like the rest of the world, Japan’s economy suffered significantly. However, they were able to make a comeback during and after World War II.

Many historians argue against the idea that Japan has acknowledged their perpetration following the bombing of American military base Pearl Harbor. Following the years after the war, stories began to be published and popularly spread following the war in the early 1950’s and 1960’s. According to Eldad Nakar, “Manga works dealing directly with World War II started to emerge in the second half of the 1950’s. The earliest one I have traced is Nagashima Shinji's Shiroi Kumo wa Yonde iru (The is Calling; 1956), which tells the story of some of the many children who were orphaned and unable to rejoice at its ending.” (p. 58). *The Is Calling* is one of many examples of re-telling history through literature. In this context, the story is given a negative implication that favors the side of the Japanese. The war cost many people the lives of their loved ones, and even their homes. Emotionally, it would be assumed to be a generational impact that would at least last the next two generations. Manga writers internalized the traumatic experiences they went through either directly or indirectly during World War II.

Although the example above presents a biased perception of the war, this next quote is quite different, “Shidenkai no Taka (The Hawk in the Shidenkai Fighter; 1963-1965), by Chiba The in summer 1944-the late stages of WWII-at a Japanese air force base in southern Taiwan operating the recently introduced Shidenkai planes.3 A fresh young pilot named Taki joins the unit and soon displays extraordinary talent in aerial combat. The story shows his character gradually maturing while he shoots down countless American planes in a string of hair-raising adventures. theme is Taki's gradual realization that the enemy, whom he has been taught to hate, is and has family and feelings just as he does himself.” (Nakar, p.60). The concept of this story debunks the counterargument of Japan erasing their participation during World War II. Relatability to a story is important for an audience to sympathize and create attachments to the writing. Within this manga shows a story of a young Japanese man who joins the military and begins a great career during the war. This story is not unlike many others who enlisted in the military within the other countries that participated in the war. What makes this manga stand out, is the humanization of the ‘enemy’. With the understanding that soldiers from the other country were not inherently evil, that gives the understanding that Japan was not 100% in the right. Taking their experience from the war, the manga illustrator presents the more neutral tone of acceptance by acknowledging that the foreigners they were fighting were just like them at the core. People might say that they are not acknowledging their role in the war, but war is all about perspective. In a story, there are many sides and perspectives that become nuanced within each other. There is no definitive way to declare something as ‘erased’ when it is not what people remember. For example, depending on the region, the United States views the Civil War quite differently. As such, is the case for Japan regarding WWII.

Counterargument

History is messy and new evidence of issues that have happened will continue to be discovered and exposed for the rest of time. Every country in the world has some type of controversial history. Whether that history depicts them as the perpetrator of the controversy, or the victim depends on the common acceptance. Japan is an example of a country that has engaged in history that does not reflect well when looking at the past. There has been an issue in Japan that showed schools teaching biased material when it came to their nation’s history regarding the war in the Pacific and World War II. Politically there is much controversy surrounding lawmakers with this issue. Many people in Japan think that educating the youth about the militant exploits of Japan. According to Tessa Morris-Suzuki, “In Japan, a longstanding topic of controversy has been the teaching of history in schools. Here, for many decades the issue focused on attempts by liberal or leftwing historians to ensure that school texts addressed the issues of wartime aggression and atrocities by the Japanese armed forces.” (p. 148). As technology continues to grow and expand, more people have access to resources that contradict the popular opinion.

Japan has the legal capability to force the authors of textbooks to redact or change things that they do not agree with. This is one of the reasons that there is an argument that Japan has attempted to eradicate its involvement within these controversies. Morris-Suzuki goes in great depth about one of the most controversial political manga artists in Japan, Yoshinori Kobayashi. Kobayashi is one of the prime examples of a ‘revisionist’ who attempts to rewrite history through his literary work. One of his most controversial manga pieces is entitled *Neo Gōmanism Manifesto Special*. In this work it shows a different take of the Pacific War and produces a more ‘revisionist approach’. The acts of the Japanese military were extremely downplayed, particularly over the brutal history behind ‘comfort women’. *Neo Gōmanism Manifesto Special* downplays the horrific acts as right-wing politicians in Japan had disputed. Comfort women were women who were forced into sexual slavery and brutalized among the military ranks. One of the worst displays of this type of brutality came after the Massacre of Nanjing. Japanese troops marched on the village of Nanjing. After forcing the village to surrender, the troops began a three-week pillage of the village. Homes were destroyed, families torn apart, and the city was unrecognizable by the time the Japanese were gone. Women were torn from their families and were exploited to horrors fitting for horror movie. Japanese soldiers would go house to house and kidnap these women from their homes and rape and torture them. That kind of monstrosity is not something that can be changed to a ‘revisionist approach’. One cannot rewrite the battle of Nanjing to become sympathetic to the Japanese cause, because of the true nature of its tragedy.

There is also the issue of writer’s bias, which is an issue that many face. The vast majority of manga illustrators that came after the war had military origins. Here is another excerpt from Nakar, "Discussing the 1950s boom in the WWII memoirs, Hicks (1998:24-25) comments that most of the writers were from the navy; that even army accounts mostly related to aerial war; and that all of them tended to emphasize courage, devotion to duty, and military technology. Yoshida (1995: 92) concurs that war writing of this period dwelled mainly on the bravery of the Japanese forces rather than the broader issues of why the war happened and how it was conducted.” (p.73). Evidence of this would discredit the idea that Japan has not diminished their wrong doings through manga. These themes that were found in the writing were themes that were the most prevalent at the time. Many in Japan thought that they were doing the right thing and had not in fact committed any crimes at all. In this way, Japan has been influenced by the aftermath of World War II.

While there is certainly a long history that shows the negative implications Japan has brought upon itself regarding history erasure, Japan has shown acknowledgement for their part in the war through manga. Nakar states, “While portraying the heroic struggles of the Japanese pilots, the stories also provided a context to these acts. Some stories clearly told readers that Japan had lost the war, situating the action at a time when Japan was on the verge of defeat. Others mentioned that the enemy had the advantage in manpower, planes, food, and raw materials, emphasizing the disadvantages that Japanese soldiers had to cope with, while fighting on.” (p.61). This goes to show that not all these stories downplayed the actions of the Japanese. In fact, publishing on these mass printed pieces of work spread that belief. Villainizing Japan as a whole for what they remember of their history is not fair, when taking into consideration that *many* if not all other countries do the same thing. As referenced in one of the examples above, the author Chiba Tetsuya pushes the narrative that Japan was *not* number one at all. Within his stories he gave the narrative that the ‘enemy’ soldiers were far from having nothing in common with Japanese soldiers. He humanized the other participants of the war just as many others have, while acknowledging that what Japan was doing was not one hundred percent right.

Conclusion

Literature can quite literally change the opinions of the public on history and has the power to spread propaganda the way that they remember it. Some literature in Japan has refused to show acknowledgement of their past militant discrepancies and attempts to paint the narrative much differently than how anyone else remembers it. However, most Japanese manga artists have given a fair account of what went on during and throughout the war. They have done so by providing their own accounts from firsthand experience on the battlefield, and by accepting defeat

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