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AUORE YAMAGATA-MONTOYA, MAXIME DANESIN & MARCO PELLITTERI

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VISUALITY AND FICTIONALITY OF JAPAN AND
EUROPE IN CROSS-CULTURAL FRAMEWORK

EDITED BY

MARCO PELLITTERI & MATTEO FABBRETTI

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A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

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Media, propaganda and politics in 20th-century Japan – The Asahi Shimbun Company; Transl. Barak Kushner

Foreword by Funabashi Yoichi. London: Bloomsbury, 2016, 300 p.

Review by Judit Erika MAGYAR | Waseda University, Japan

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By the time news of the Taisho emperor's death spread in the land, Japan was no more the international weakling of the Meiji period that had signed unequal treaties. Yet, modernisation brought about not only economic but also social developments that were propelled by the establishment of western style news media. *Asahi Shimbun* has been fortifying the ranks of Japanese national newspapers since 1879 when it began circulation as an illustrated publication. Back then, English journalism served as an example for papers and *Asahi* has been so successful that, in addition to staying afloat, it has today built up a circulation of 7.96 million copies for its morning edition (*Asahi Shimbun Company 2017*).

The reviewed book examines how this important medium served as a facilitator of information dissemination for the better part of the 20th century and in what way journalists completed their task. In the foreword, Funabashi Yoichi, a former Editor-in-Chief and a prominent leading intellectual in the country, looks at what role the journal paid in national opinion formation in the Showa era (1926-1989). (The volume includes only a handful of references to Heisei era documents). Funabashi woefully states that journalism lost its viability and power of criticism at around the 1931 Manchurian incident when a congratulatory article was published after the news reached Japan. He further ponders the successes and failures of journalists in reporting the truth and whether the past dailies stand the trial of history.

The publication is unique in that it does not adhere to a particular style: it simply follows a chronological pattern in referring to historical events and discusses how the newspaper presented the issues in the past. Although there are similar renderings of

previous media coverings, – such as the book on *Picture Weekly (Shashin Shūhō)* in which the editors build their arguments around themes that the magazine often discussed – the *Asahi's* compilation does not survey topics but rather, events. Furthermore, it does not fit the ranks of typical newspaper histories either since it fails to provide an extensive explanation about the paper's inception and development.

The explanatory style of the book does not only draw on news articles published in *Asahi* but also on those put forward by other agencies. The individual entries refer to a single event and discuss how a particular episode in history was reported and interpreted by the above-mentioned news organisations. However, a substantial body of the examined sources also include internal documents, interviews conducted with contemporary staff members and committee meeting minutes which help explain why the paper decided to chronicle any specific incident the way it did. For the reader, the most intriguing renditions of news might be those that provide a historical snapshot of the relationship between the media and society during WWII and its immediate aftermath.

The translator, Barak Kushner, is a professor of Japanese History at the University of Cambridge in the UK and has published extensively on Japanese media history. Apart from rendering the Japanese original into English, he also wrote a noteworthy preface and conclusion that provide an insightful frame to the publication. He finds it important to mention that the primary book was longer – and consequentially wider – in its covering of history but the English version is more relevant to international readers who might not recognise nuances that are apparent to the domestic audience. Kushner argues that the *Asahi* journalists' work over the little more than six decades of the Showa era highlighted the fact that Japan was neither a victim of international events nor a pawn of foreign powers but rather, it was the action and inaction of, the misdeeds and misinterpretations of world affairs by its politicians, leaders and military personnel that ran the country amok. Furthermore, *Asahi* was not a passive reporter in the process of shaping events, thus, the company's take on creating national memory and choice of perspective in its articles substantially contributed to the popular view. As a prominent member of the Japanese mass media, being a mediator between the governing authority and the general public at the lower echelons of democracy, the *Asahi* has always been in a unique position to channel public opinion if only by the sheer number of its subscriptions. The Showa era saw Japan in various roles: an increasingly powerful emperor nation; a stubborn military power; a country that lost

its sovereignty to the one it had initially attacked; a humble collaborator during its own occupation; an emergent economic giant; a defiant competitor in the Bubble era; and finally, a former moneymaking powerhouse pondering its “lost decades”. However, not only the higher-level decision-makers were and are the only variables in the equation of *Asahi*’s success. Private citizens, the consumers of printed and electronic news, are as much to blame when a country goes awry and should take equal credit for the successes it achieves. National discourse is not exclusively sculpted by those with a strong voice but also by the ordinary fellow who pays for the newspaper that expresses a particular viewpoint.

The third constituent of influence on *Asahi* lies in its own strength and weight as a persuasive news medium. Other papers and publications often borrowed ideas and views from the company, following in its footpath when resorting to self-censorship during the war or challenging authority in the latter Showa period. As Kushner says, the Japanese media often “wanted to see themselves as a fourth estate” (Asahi Shimbun Company 2016, 278), playing a role in the country’s history beyond what news organisations typically accomplish in other parts of the world.

The book itself is not typical in its layout: it contains 27 bundles of items which – although vaguely following a chronological order – start off with a thematic chapter on the death of the Showa Emperor – more commonly known in the West as Emperor Hirohito – and continue with a 14-page account of the beginning of his reign that included the Depression. Each subsequent cluster then contains only so many articles so that none would go over 20 pages, the shortest being 7. The thematic compilations make it easier for the reader to navigate the volume and the sparsely inserted pictures break the monotony of the text. Not that the narrative in itself is boring, on the contrary: each expose contains a brief introduction to the overall historical setting and political climate, continues with a lengthier explanation of the actual event and typically concludes with a final sentence that links the topic to the next section. The writing style is pleasantly fluid and one can easily devour the entire book in only a few hours despite the hefty 300-page length. That said, the original Japanese came in at a much longer 592 pages but the English rendition is a consciously abridged version which was the result of repeated requests from the publishing company. Despite the limitations, the translator team made sure that the international audience receives ample explanation to the potentially murky pieces of information and provided a list of

notes to every chapter at the end of the volume by tracking down the original sources (Asahi Shimbun Company 2016, 279-288).

As for the individual topics, every chapter endeavours to provide a well-rounded summary of events related to them. To cite an example, chapter 9 – titled “Countdown to the War’s End” – which is one of the longest at 18 pages, encompasses 8 chronological news flashbacks. The first, “Mokusatsu’[sic!] and the Potsdam Declaration” narrates how the *Dōmei* News Agency translated “*mokusatsu*” as “ignore” whereas both the Associated Press and Reuters opted for the word “reject” when reporting on the Cabinet’s reaction to the Potsdam Declaration. The story snowballs from there and the last sentence points out that “the subsequent dropping of the atomic bomb and the Soviet Union’s participation in the war both stemmed from Japan’s rejection of the Potsdam Declaration” (Asahi Shimbun Company 2016, 90).

The next snippet of news in the chapter refers to how “Shipping stocks skyrocket[ed]” as a result of the above Declaration and goes on to highlight the businesses that foresaw an imminent postwar reconstruction. “The bomb” segment of the collection speaks for itself: it discusses the Hiroshima atomic explosion and how “Truman’s speech was ‘the first use of the term `atomic bomb` in a Japanese newspaper” (Asahi Shimbun Company 2016, 92). The chapter then resumes with “The origin of atomic bomb myths”, “Failed expectations”, “The lost report on the Soviet entry into the war”, “Reporters at ground zero”, and finally, “Misleading inferences” which throws light on the ensuing argument between the Cabinet Information Bureau and the Army Ministry, both of which insisted that the media publish their version of the directive. In the end, both were released to the public “side-by side with the same font size”, and the Japanese people were called upon to be wise, “persevere” and “remain calm” (Asahi Shimbun Company 2016, 93).

To sum up, in their address to the readers both Funabashi and Kushner refer to the phrase “history repeats itself”, not in a declaratory but a rather sceptical manner. They conclude by asserting that the journalist’s and historian’s role in narrating events is to “reflect carefully and diligently on its [history’s] provenance and our own role in its evolution” (Asahi Shimbun Company 2016, 277). The idea that a conscious, considered and responsible rendering of events should be the goal of reporting permeates the book and raises awareness about the individual’s responsibility in the circle of life.

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