

Review Essay

Japan's Past, Present, and Future: Contested National Storytelling in the Age of Uncertainty

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David Leheny. *Empire of Hope: The Sentimental Politics of Japanese Decline*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018. 230 pp.

Erik Ropers. *Voices of the Korean Minority in Postwar Japan: Histories against the Grain*. Abington, UK: Routledge, 2019. 215 pp.

David Leheny's *Empire of Hope: The Sentimental Politics of Japanese Decline* and Erik Ropers's *Voices of the Korean Minority in Postwar Japan: Histories against the Grain* both contribute to our broader and deeper understanding of contemporary Japan. Leheny and Ropers provide readers with rich case studies to explore contentious national collective sentiment and identity. The monographs rely heavily on critical discourse analysis while epistemologically evoking contemporaneous social and political contexts. Respectively, Leheny and Ropers explore politics and historiography, which cannot be fully explained by rationality or empirical evidence alone. Both authors delve into the complex discursive politics of this age of uncertainty in the postindustrial world order, a discourse that remains deeply embedded in our everyday worldview today. No one is convinced that tomorrow will be better than today, and our concern over how we are all to (re)gain confidence and meaningful purpose creates a sentimental politics or a vocalization of histories that goes against the grain. These sentiments and vocalizations evoke social and political divisions. Leheny reminds us that "our collective sentiments feel ordinary, common, and justified when they fit well with what we already know to be our past and what we expect to be our future" (26). Ropers states, "Across space and time, historical works have been used for particular social, political, or cultural purposes; to lend support to or challenge certain interpretations or memories of past events" (3). Facts do not exist as such but are always smudged by wishful thinking and overt and covert political intentions among discursive participants.

Leheny's *Empire of Hope* examines "the representation of emotion in Japanese political life and transnational engagement" (5). His analysis builds on the recent

affective turn (particularly after the 2000s) across the humanities and social sciences. For example, referring to literature scholars Peter Brooks, who deconstructed the narrative of “melodramatic imagination,” and Lauren Berlant, who conceptualized “cruel optimism” (112), Leheny deconstructs the logics of representation behind a wide range of emotionally driven quotidian shared stories. Seemingly unrelated cases of collective emotional representations in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Japanese politics—public debates, popular culture, and media sensations (8)—are poetically woven together into coherent stories of national sentiments projected by concerns about Japan’s position in the global community. All representations demonstrate “how a promise of Japan’s collective agency emerges from a sentimental construction of innocence, of innate and rediscoverable goodness, as national virtue in the face of a threatening or unpredictable world” (8–9). National emotional stories represent past glories and global acclaim, present sufferings, and prognostic rediscoveries. Leheny scrutinizes “how and when people express national or collective emotions,” for emotional expressions shed light on “silenced or marginalized political claims” (5). Political goals are attained more effectively when synchronized with familiar, shared sentimental national stories that shape collective boundaries and identity.

Leheny’s “Souls of the *Ehime Maru*” (chapter 2) and “Cheer Up, Vietnam” (chapter 3) examine in detail how complex and mixed responses to emotionally stirring events involving innocent victims consolidate into banal national (and sentimental) storytelling. The U.S. nuclear submarine *Greenville’s* dramatic display of an abrupt ascent to the surface for its prominent civilian visitors caused a catastrophic collision near Honolulu and took the lives of eight students and an instructor aboard the *Ehime Maru*, a Japanese fishery high school’s training ship. The February 2001 tragedy involved a moving story of two countries overcoming cultural differences and establishing mutual respect, which enabled the technologically challenging undersea recovery of the victims’ bodies for proper funerals. Leheny examines the incident’s aftermath using various media commentaries from different standpoints to illustrate how official claims can express the politics of national emotions, which, once invoked, establish “the nation as an affective community while helping to discipline unruly elements” (60).

Leheny reveals another unfolding of the politics of emotion and the logic of collective emotional representation in his close reading of the heart-moving humanitarian aid that Japan extended to surgically separate conjoined twins Nguyen Viet and Duc, who were Agent Orange victims in 1988. The story is not just about war victims’ lives saved thanks to Japan’s humanitarian aid backed by advanced medicine and a strong Japanese yen. The entire media sensation reaffirms Japan’s self-confidence, putting aside any antiwar and anti-U.S. imperialist campaigning and environmental concerns. Leheny demonstrates how this melodramatic unfolding of aid to innocent war victims functions as a moment of Japan’s solidarity and autonomy in international relations and bridges diverse political stances toward the fundamental cause of the problem (72, 89). The story ends up being further simplified by the thriving

Duc's follow-up reports, which are spun into a national goodwill tale of aid to the disabled. (Viet, who had been in a coma since the separation, died in 2007.)

Leheny continues his contextual readings of media sensations, moving on to an inquiry into "the craze about the Japanese popular culture craze" (chapter 4, "Cool Optimism"). Referring to Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism," Leheny connects emotional components of "soft power" (political scientist Joseph Nye's theorization of the power to persuade in international politics) with a broader debate on Japan's collective self-assessment of its globally influential status. The author then analyzes how "Gross National Cool"/Soft Power initiatives serve as "a heuristic device for grasping how Japanese policy makers viewed their regional and global roles at the midpoint of Japan's two lost decades" (111). "Cool Japan" satisfies Japanese national identity by affirming its transnational popularity and attractiveness, although Japan's application of soft power itself is neither substantially significant nor influential in international relations.

The next two chapters are more fieldwork-oriented, featuring discourses drawn primarily from mass media and cinematic representations. Following the anatomy of the narrative structure of melodramatic Japanese emotionality—hopeful resolutions of traumas in the community—through a popular theater company's production (chapter 5, "Staging *The Empire of Light*"), Leheny analyzes an influential Japanese social scientific project, *Kibōgaku*, "social sciences of hope," which incorporates his real-time experience of "3-11," the major earthquake and tsunami that devastated the Tohoku coastal region and caused the Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster (chapter 6, "The Peripheral U-Turn"). Leheny richly describes findings drawn from the case study of the site of the hope studies project, Kamaishi City, Tohoku, which underwent a typical industrial decline (the closure of a steel mill). The group of renowned social scientists involved in the project see "salvation in the social" (151). Kamaishi symbolizes a case of successful coping through weak ties with broad social structural change. Relying on the project's final report, Leheny again recalls Berlant's "cruel optimism" and redefines it as "an almost addictive, self-punishing attachment to that which is unattainable" (181). The author concludes that hope resonates well with the already familiar idea of community. Emotional representations projected through melodramas of overcoming crises incorporate agency and time components; the story builds on the past and projects itself onto future goals (150, 183).

Leheny's concluding chapter, "Everything Sinks," summarizes each chapter's case study with additional popular cultural representations as well as Japan's recent representation as a "problem pioneer" (194). He restates the "messy" connections among politics, emotion, and culture precisely because of the way we are used to the state's banal representation of national sentiments (190), and validates his approach by showing how components of social narratives can be seen through "critical reflection on emotionality" and "official emotion" (191). Affect theory thus helps us see how familiar emotional stories produce and reproduce national identity and boundaries in relation with other nations.

Leheny intentionally opts out of analyzing Japan's relationships with Korea and China, which he deems more obviously political, so that he can focus more on the emotional and the seemingly apolitical (25). Ropers's *Voices of the Korean Minority in Postwar Japan* supplements Leheny's devotion to Japan's concerns about its global reputation in softer realms by tackling one of the most contentious inter-Northeast Asian geopolitical components: history writing about prewar Japan and the total mobilization of Korean colonial subjects into Japan's war. Relations between Japan and South Korea often deteriorate as historical (and territorial) disputes run parallel. In many ways, the contentious historiography on which Ropers focuses can also be emotionally driven, significantly influencing Japan's global reputation. Whereas Leheny raises the logic of emotional politics in relation to blameless victimhood, Ropers shows that the innocence of victims is often not as apparent as it seems. Victimhood, which simultaneously establishes perpetrators, entails the politics of proper apology and redress beyond historiography. Therefore, it is fundamentally contentious and prone to rebuttals.

Ropers examines three major contentious arenas in the postwar historiography of wartime Japan—systematic Korean labor recruitment into Japan during World War II, Korean atomic bomb victims, and “comfort women” serving the Japanese military (termed “enforced military prostitution” by Ropers)—all of which are related to Japan's colonization of Korea and Japan's total wartime mobilization of colonial subjects. The title *Voices of the Korean Minority in Postwar Japan* can be misleading, in that many of the texts Ropers introduces are in fact authored by Japanese intellectuals. The volume could also appear to be about postwar Korean minority history in Japan, but it presents a summary of ongoing debates between different standpoints regarding what the colonization of Korea entailed and its implications for Japan, including *Zainichi* (permanent ethnic Korean residents of Japan).

Ropers emphasizes that history entails social, political, and historical texts as “products of the periods in which they were written” (5). He explores “discursive frameworks of how history and the violation of human rights during the wartime period have been written,” focusing on the process of historical knowledge production, or “the *history of history*” (6, emphasis in original). According to Ropers, by examining “how different audiences read, write, and interpret historical evidence and writings across time,” Japan's wartime past and the marginalization of *Zainichi* in postwar Japanese society can be better understood. We also learn how to approach “the contentious and politicized past which continues to affect us all today” (6). Put differently, the book is a strictly discursive endeavor, rather than what we expect in a conventional historian's volume based on primary sources of archival materials or firsthand oral narratives. Citing the Foucauldian concept of discourse and Jacques Derrida's notion of “the text,” Ropers outlines his approach of treating texts as multilayered, indicative of intertwined and power-mediated discursive and social practices, and tracing other authors' writing and research (16–17).

Beginning with earlier foundational narratives and more recent debates, Ropers first introduces the encompassing issue of wartime Korean labor mobilization (chapters 2 and 3). It is encompassing in that Korean atomic bomb victims and “comfort women” are part of Japan’s total mobilization effort during World War II. Instead of chronologically tracing canonical texts on the subject published in the 1960s and 1970s, Ropers begins with the prolific lay scholar Kim Yŏng-dal’s critique of the existing research on Korean conscripted labor. Having outlined how researchers loosely define Korean labor conscription into Japan in terms of the recruitment method and timing, Ropers examines three texts: historian Pak Kyong-sik’s *Record of Korean Forced Recruitment*; other writings by Pak and his associates, *Zainichi*, and Japanese; and articles by journalist Kim Chan-jong. Ropers characterizes Pak’s work as “ethno-nationalistic,” building on Marxism and Pak’s pro-North Korean political stance (40–41). Ropers mentions the social and political context around the time Pak was writing. Japan was about to normalize relations with South Korea; the normalization treaty was signed in 1965. Ropers bypasses any detailed explanation about how this treaty was opposed by not only South Koreans but also many *Zainichi* because it exchanged war-related individual claims for a massive economic aid package for the military dictatorship. Ropers mentions the normalization treaty several times but glosses over its contents (8, 113). This treatment diverts from his promise to contextualize historical writing, because the treaty laid the foundational disagreement and implications among Japanese, South Koreans, and *Zainichi*—the three arenas of contested historiography to which Ropers devotes this volume.

Ropers’s “History and the Politics of Testimony” (chapter 3) discusses efforts to collect historical testimonies as well as *Zainichi* scholar Tei Taikin’s vehement rejection of Pak’s canon. Tei is a second-generation intellectual—not a historian by training—whose treatise heavily relies on *Zainichi* scholar Kim Yŏng-dal’s earlier critique and criticizes Pak through Tei’s selective citation of testimonies (Ropers calls the subsection “minimalist research”). Ropers also briefly connects Tei’s work with a range of popular cultural expressions of the “anti-Korean wave.”

Ropers’s choice to examine *Zainichi* victims’ accounts of the atomic bombings highlights how the inclusion of Korean victims destabilizes the Japanese victim-consciousness narratives of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (chapter 4). Testimonies collected throughout the 1960s and 1970s from irradiated and/or injured Koreans primarily residing in South Korea feature more information on the individuals’ entire preceding life histories—the context of migration from Korea to Japan—up to August 1945, whereas the testimonies of their Japanese counterparts describe only the day of atomic bombing and its aftermath (98). Ropers discusses the context of narratives that objected to the deeply held national story of Japanese victimhood and touches on the exclusion of Korean (and Chinese) victims from the Japanese welfare system that paid for ongoing medical treatment and offered stipends. The exclusion, he notes, had no legal basis, with justice having been obtained through litigation only as late as the 2000s (89). Although Ropers concludes that public memories about atomic bombings maintained an

“ethnicized and exclusionary framework” despite objections, the demand for the inclusion of colonial citizens into wartime Japanese history continues (104). He suggests that alternative historiographers mobilize testimonies for advocacy (99).

Ropers’s last two chapters feature emotionally stirring and contested debates over “comfort women” and the issue of “enforced military prostitution” (112). Revisionist historians, conservative Japanese citizens, and the Japanese government have denied the state’s involvement in the recruitment of “comfort women.” The controversy goes far beyond the borders of Japan and South Korea into “History Wars” on a global scale (Yamaguchi 2020). Ropers devotes the first of his two chapters on the topic to an examination of the early narratives and debates among journalists and concerned citizens (chapter 5). He first challenges a common assumption of Japanese amnesia and silence on enforced military prostitution that was supposedly not broken until the 1990s. He introduces the early work of Japanese writer Senda Kakō, who focused on recollections about the Japanese military’s health and hygiene management, and subsequent research by magazine writer Hirota Kazuko, who highlighted Japanese soldiers and prostitutes, and Korean author Kim Il-myon, who wrote about Korean women forced to work at comfort stations (113). Ropers is critical of Senda’s research for providing too little evidence on the disputed forced nature of recruitment (128–129). Ropers’s evaluation of Hirota’s work rests on its focus on the voluntary nature of Japanese military prostitutes whose duty also included service as unprofessional medical aids, a perspective that challenges the one-dimensional treatment of “comfort women” as agency-less victims (130–131). Ropers regards Kim’s monograph on “comfort women” as another example of an ethno-nationalist perspective, a perspective much like Pak’s (135). Although Ropers notes Kim’s unconventional use of a Japanese novel depicting soldier-prostitute interactions and an established connection with Japanese state-sponsored comfort stations for U.S. soldiers in occupied Japan, the ways Kim combines already available published sources illustrates that Japanese military prostitution was in fact a well-remembered and commented-upon phenomenon (139). Ropers could have explained more thoroughly what he meant by “the milieu of the 1970s” (127). In this chapter, he contextualizes the literature he is analyzing by merely mentioning “the anti-Japanese sentiments present among the *Zainichi* community in 1960s and 1970s Japan” (142), but the 1970s also mark the beginning of a *Zainichi* departure from earlier generations’ ethno-national discourse, as both sociologist John Lie (2008) and Japan scholar David Chapman (2008) have already pointed out (Ropers cites both authors several times).

Ropers’s second chapter addressing the “comfort women issue” (chapter 6) departs from an examination of materials aimed at the ordinary citizen readers he has just finished discussing. Here, Ropers delves into scholars’ more recent discussions on the topic. He traces the intellectually engaging and politically committed debates among Japanese feminist scholars Ueno Chizuko and Suzuki Yūko, *Zainichi* feminist scholars Kim Puja and Yamashita Yon’ē, and Japanese philosopher Takahashi Tetsuya. Ropers first illustrates a case of confluence between identity politics and historiography. In their

efforts to deny Japanese state involvement, Japanese revisionist historians exaggerate the fabricated testimony of Yoshida Seiji, a former bureaucrat in charge of labor recruitment, on Japanese military involvement with Korean women's recruitment to comfort stations in his published memoir confessing systematic abductions of Korean women. On the contrary, historians who chronicle the Japanese military's systematic involvement barely adopt Yoshida's testimony as evidence (165–167). Highlighting debates among Ueno, Kim, and Yamashita, Ropers contextualizes the “comfort women issue” in academic debates over the implication of colonialism, nationalism, and feminism, extending his argument to include Suzuki's critique of the emperor system and its systematic exclusion of the marginalized. The inclusion of Takahashi's analysis of historical revisionism and war responsibility lets Ropers clarify the arbitrary uses of definitions and adoption of supporting evidence, whether documentation or testimonies (187).

In the epilogue, Ropers reminds readers of the complexity of historical enterprise, historical consciousness, and historiographers' problematic relations with political advocacy (206). Wartime historiography involving Korean labor mobilization in any form demonstrates colossal confusions in terminology and methodological choices. Although *Zainichi* and Japanese historical narratives of wartime experiences are likely to oscillate between victims and perpetrators, or between victims and survivors (depending on the acknowledged agency of Korean colonial subjects), Ropers warns readers against such reductionist simplification (205).

Both authors exercise purposeful editing and utilize identical sets of testimony for different (political) purposes. What Ropers illustrates points to broader epistemological concerns. Combining these concerns with the lure of state representations of collective emotion that Leheny deconstructs, we continue to wonder about the ways in which we consume historical narratives and representations of any national or collective emotion. In the arenas of contentious historiography, compensating for records systematically destroyed by the Japanese military before the arrival of the Allied forces, for example, and in our everyday exposure to media sensations and popular cultural products, so much rests on what we want to feel about ourselves and to which community we wish to belong. Both monographs contribute immensely to the existing body of Japanese studies literature through the authors' critical and cautionary analyses of everyday and historiographic discourses. Simultaneously, Japanese studies scholars need to complement these stimulating discursive explorations with updated monographs based on ethnographic and empirical approaches, in order to deepen understanding about contemporary Japanese society and its diversity. Contested national storytelling in the age of uncertainty—*anomie* across the globe after the age of progress has long gone—continues to unfold.

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About the Reviewer

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