

Review Essay

Records of Japan's Short-Lived Empire

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Jeremy A. Yellen. *The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere: When Total Empire Met Total War*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019. 288 pp.

Benjamin Uchiyama. *Japan's Carnival War: Mass Culture on the Home Front, 1937–1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 280 pp.

Bill Sewell. *Constructing Empire: The Japanese in Changchun, 1905–45*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2019. 295 pp.

Our vision of modern empires is still predominantly European-centered. For many English speakers, especially in Great Britain, the word "empire" evokes the realm that ruled the seven seas from London and on which "the sun never set." Tellingly, a volume titled *The Age of Empires* lists thirteen of them, in order to analyze their fundamental role in the creation of today's global civilization (Aldrich 2020). Despite this bold claim, the table of contents reveals that the book's grasp is far from global. It includes Scandinavia as "an outsider in European imperialism," calls Italy "the last empire," and even lists the Soviet Union among global empires. However, one of the most expansive, if short-lived, modern empires—Japan—is never mentioned. It seems that the Japanese Empire is an outsider among outsiders.

In English-language media, mentions of the Japanese Empire often come packaged in familiar tropes of Pearl Harbor, kamikaze pilots, and the mistreatment of Allied captives. Scholarly works paint a more nuanced picture, but even these works often view Japan's quest for empire as an anomaly, defined by what it was not, different from and foil to the "traditional" European imperial projects. Part of the reason why Japan's empire barely features in the Western imagination might also be because of the shortness of its existence. Like a meteor tearing through the night sky before fizzling out in a matter of seconds, Japan's quest for empire lasted but a moment in historic terms. Importantly, although it continued to live on in the memories of its former victims or enemies, in Japan itself memories of empire were excised from the public imagination through selective commemoration and emphasis on the victimhood of ordinary people. Yet despite its brief existence, the empire left lasting legacies. Over the past decade, a growing number of works have

scrutinized the empire and its traces from within and without, illuminating unknown and understudied parts of its history, but shadowy areas still abound.

Three new books shed light on some of the understudied dimensions of Japan's imperial project, thus expanding our knowledge of the Japanese Empire and World War II in East Asia. They challenge facile assumptions and help us reconsider Japan's imperial adventures as complex transnational interactions. Read together or separately, these volumes enrich the Anglophone understanding of Japan's war and empire with new evidence gleaned from archives and introduce compelling terms and concepts that refresh the by-now dated insights of their scholarly predecessors. Jeremy A. Yellen's *The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere* delves into the making (and unmaking) of Japan's eponymous new order for Asia, Benjamin Uchiyama's *Japan's Carnival War* uncovers carnivalesque dimensions of culture and life on the domestic front during the Asia-Pacific War, and Bill Sewell's *Constructing Empire* seeks the civilian traces of imperial construction by zooming in on the history of Japanese in Changchun. Although different in approach and focus, these three books, echo one another in significant ways in their analyses of the total war, the mass media's role in reporting and recreating the conflict in the public realm, and the varying facets of the new order that Japan sought to impose on Asia and the world. Let us consider some of their contributions.

In *The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere: When Total Empire Met Total War*, Jeremy Yellen offers a lucid, dynamic, and highly readable history of Japan's attempt to usher in a new order in Asia during World War II. Yellen organizes the rich material at hand around two broad themes that reveal his approach to the study of the Co-Prosperity Sphere first as an "imagined sphere," and then as a "contested sphere." These themes form the book's two fundamental parts, each containing three well-crafted chapters that present the Co-Prosperity Sphere not as an order imposed by the Japanese from above, but as a transnational process shaped in collaboration and conflict, negotiation and resistance. Initially forged in attempts to achieve quick victory in the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945)—a conflict that was proving unwinnable—the Sphere soon acquired a greater utility for the empire's survival. One of the book's great merits is in demonstrating how the Sphere, borne of the need to achieve a breakthrough from a Chinese quagmire, gradually unfolded into a grand dream of an Asian community. As the Sphere evolved into a utopian vision of mutually beneficial prosperity, its trajectory reflected the goals and prejudices, as well as follies, of its Japanese masterminds. The Sphere, they believed, would secure Japan's "self-existence and self-defense" (71) by providing it with access to resources vital for victory in the war against the status-quo powers. But it would also serve the grander aim of establishing Japan's supremacy in Asia beyond the war's end—an aim greeted with both support and reluctance in Asian countries. This lofty-sounding goal of Asian unity, Yellen argues, was a bad disguise for Japan's imperialist ambitions, which were not very different from those of the European colonial empires. Asian nations that supported the Sphere were all too aware of this, but they tried to make the most of "Japan's moment" in Asia to achieve their own goals. The Sphere was thus a complex, constantly contested space that took shape in other Asian capitals as much as in Tokyo.

The book's two complementary parts work well together in conveying this complexity. Part One (chapters 1–3) traces the Co-Prosperity Sphere's emergence in the minds of the Japanese civilian and military leaders, and in the realm of bureaucratic deliberations where various agencies championed their versions of the project. Yellen skillfully disentangles the web of causes and outcomes that made the Sphere the most favored path out of the corner into which Japan had painted itself in all-out war with China. Although focused mainly on Japan, Yellen's account of Japan's thrust south reflects the Japanese leaders' acute awareness—and wariness—of the changeable realities of global alliances and rivalries. This wariness was not always directed toward the Allies, as Yellen compellingly demonstrates in his analysis of the uneasy relations between Japan and its most important ally, Nazi Germany. Japan's thrust south toward building the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was borne of “fears of German designs on Asia” (26) as much as it was borne of the Japanese leaders' apprehension of American power in the region. This proposition recasts the Tripartite Pact that formalized the Berlin-Rome-Tokyo Axis in 1940, especially the German-Japanese alliance, as a difficult marriage of convenience characterized by rivalry as well as cooperation. Although tensions between the allies have been studied before, Yellen suggests that in joining the Axis, Japan was trying to check the expansionist aims of not only the United States, United Kingdom, and other Allies, but also of Germany. This analysis demonstrates how wartime realities dictated the rhetoric and methods of Japanese diplomats in dealing with partners in Asia and beyond, seen in the change of course from foreign minister Matsuoka Yōsuke's “spheres of influence” diplomacy (1940–1941) to the more conciliatory stance of Shigemitsu Mamoru (1943–1945).

Part Two (chapters 4–6) shifts the reader's gaze across the seas toward the vast territories that Japan strove to incorporate into its new order. Yellen focuses on how two nations—Burma and the Philippines—perceived and dealt with the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. This choice of two “‘independent’ dependencies” to analyze the impact of the Sphere in Asia is what distinguishes Yellen's book from existing literature. Here the author qualifies the more accepted views of Burmese and Filipino leaders as traitors or “puppets” by introducing the term “patriotic collaborators”—those who helped expand Japan's interests in their countries and the broader region “to safeguard or advance their country's interests” (106). It was a mutually beneficial arrangement: Japan was happy to control and empower its greatest rivals, Great Britain and the United States, whereas the Burmese and Filipino leaders used Japan's presence to lay the foundations of their independence from former and current masters at the war's end.

Burmese and Filipino figureheads were not alone in their attempts to use Japan's increasingly unfavorable position in the war to achieve their own interests. Elements of resistance also existed in Japan's own society. Clumsy and disjointed attempts at selling the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere to foreigners with divergent interests and aspirations make more sense when considered in the context of the domestic front. In *Japan's Carnival War: Mass Culture on the Home Front, 1937–1945*, Benjamin Uchiyama challenges the widely accepted notions and images of the war as a national project driven by “total war mobilization ideology” and sustained, on the one hand, by relentless propaganda that demanded

unwavering loyalty to the emperor and, on the other, a repressive system of political control. The book's premise is that for Japanese society during the war, represented here by "The Five Kings of Carnival War"—the reporter, the munitions worker, the soldier, the movie star, and the youth aviator—it was not all gloom, suffering, and sacrifice. Focused on the intersection of the total war and the less studied aspects of the wartime society—consumerism, entertainment, and mass culture—Uchiyama's analysis reveals a carnival amid the sacrifice and suffering. As the author explains, "The idea of carnival war challenges the view that wartime Japan was an inert, oppressive period in which the state unquestioningly ruled over most facets of daily life and in which smooth harmonious collaboration between public and private actors defined the experience of total war" (4). In five chapters that correspond to the five protagonists of the "carnival," Uchiyama uncovers alternative realities and experiences created by the "intersection of war mobilization and mass culture" (15). The carnival kings—some quite skillfully, others less so—negotiate these two realms and what lies between.

Studying domestic attitudes toward the war through the idea of "carnival" is a refreshing approach. Yet "carnival war" is not a fiction that Uchiyama animates to counterpose the horrors of the war in an optimistic attempt to reconsider the ordeals of the home front. Rather than an antithesis of the war, carnival is one of war's components: "Without total war, there could be no carnival war" (19). Indeed, some of the most memorable images of the carnival were only possible in wartime conditions. Take, for example, the 1938 ban the Home Ministry imposed on movie fans (mostly young female students) seeking autographs from movie stars. The deeper the military and the empire became mired in the hopeless war effort, the more riotous and raucous the carnival became. The two worlds of war and carnival coexisted as surreal parallel universes, overlapping at times, and coming together in Uchiyama's analysis. Such an analysis does not shy away from the war's atrocities, nor does it need to; rather, it describes a different, parallel reality of Japanese society in which war had transformed into a carnival. The mass media played a central, subversive, and mediating role linking these realities with a "spirit of irreverence... [that] destabilized state propaganda by forcing consumer-subjects to constantly switch between an official and a 'carnivalized' understanding of the war" (26).

The book's five chapters each have a protagonist—a compound character combining the behavioral traits and aspirations of real people in wartime Japan. Uchiyama elevates these personae to the status of "kings," providing each with the agency and influence of someone who had control over surrounding events, rather than being caught up in the workings of the total war system. In chapter 1, the war correspondent takes charge of inscribing the war into the public realm as a succession of thrill-inducing, speedy victories for the Japanese army. In chapter 2, the munitions worker—a ubiquitous fixture of the home front—manipulates the emotions of the domestic populace, inspiring fascination and envy with his flamboyance and profligacy in conditions of wartime need. Chapter 3 traces the changing fortunes of the soldier, the carnival king revered and derided in equal measures by a domestic populace both exhilarated and exhausted by the war effort. Chapter 4 diversifies the book's hitherto exclusively masculine cast by introducing

the persona of the movie star, who links the glamorous world of cinema with the state-imposed notions of loyalty and order. Finally, chapter 5 is devoted to the “final and most powerful king of carnival war,” the “youth aviator who dazzles the home front with visions of consumerist desire before transforming into the kamikaze pilot” (202). The youth aviator is not the only character converted into a new role; every one of the kings is a “shape-shifter” within his or her role, conveying the fluid, ever-changing nature of the carnival war.

Although the carnival kings take center stage, the book also explains the dilemmas the Japanese government faced between mobilizing more people for military conscription and other military-related service (e.g., work in munitions factories), and encouraging women to be devoted mothers who look after their families and prop up the home front as well as industrial workers helping the front lines. The book successfully carries out the important task of elucidating how these dilemmas entailed conflicts and resentments, divisions and inequalities.

Japanese society’s experiences of war and empire is also the focus of Bill Sewell’s *Constructing Empire: The Japanese in Changchun, 1905–45*, which “explores the aspects of Japanese experience in Changchun/Xinjing to examine civilian contributions to empire” (10). The society in question is a colonial one, a seedling of Mother Japan planted with hopes in a new land. In this well-researched study, Sewell shows how Japanese civilians from various walks of life—South Manchuria Railway Company employees, merchants, teachers, post office workers, engineers, and others—constructed their new existences in Changchun, which became the capital of the model colony of Manchukuo under the name Xinjing, “new capital.” Importantly, Sewell’s study shifts the limelight from the chief drivers of imperial expansion—the Japanese military and civilians in military employment—to the civilian empire-builders whose role in constructing, maintaining, and expanding the empire on the Asian mainland was significant: the Japanese in Changchun “through their presence and daily affairs were complicit in the imperialist project” (28). In planning, building, and developing the new capital, the Japanese aimed to promote not only their urban visions and architectural achievements but also Japan’s development model for Asia. Importantly, Sewell explains, this ideal colony of Manchukuo later served as a model for new wartime governments in the Philippines and Burma, pillars of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

Constructing Empire is divided into four core chapters plus an introduction and conclusion. In chapter 1, Sewell shows how in planning their new capital the Japanese imagined “a new social vision, one ostensibly designed to be superior to anything offered by the West” (43). Chapter 2 demonstrates this vision in practice by analyzing the construction of several modern buildings in Changchun, “imperial, Pan-Asianist structures and their modernist foundations” (64). The third chapter analyzes how Changchun’s urban economy was integrated, along with the city itself, into the broader economic structures of the Japanese Empire. In the fourth chapter, Sewell turns to how the Japanese imagined and built a modern, literate, and diverse society in Changchun. The narrative in these chapters is grounded in vibrant historic detail, which results in a readable, empirically rich account.

Sewell writes that “empire proved popular in Japan, engendering nationalism and imbuing Japanese with a sense of greatness” (22). This was perhaps

understandable in 1930s Japan, which was distancing itself from the international community, as the empire's expansion into Manchuria provided not only an outlet for the built-up fumes of nationalist frustration but also real opportunities for migration, employment, and profit-making. Yet what engendered nationalism and inspired pride was not so easily forgotten, even as the empire had to make a backdoor exit out of history following Japan's defeat in the war. Sewell squarely points out perhaps the most important reason why the empire still evokes positive views among some Japanese citizens with or without personal memories of Manchukuo. He writes, "Because Japanese society did not undergo the kind of self-examination witnessed in postwar Germany ... postwar perceptions of pre-war efforts reshaping the colonial world often remained positive" (ix).

The book is acutely aware of the chimera-like qualities of Japanese propaganda regarding Manchukuo. Grounding his analysis in a broad range of sources, Sewell shows that the railway town of Changchun was not a city without a past, awaiting the Japanese to arrive and inscribe its future, nor were the Manchurian expanses around it empty land awaiting hardworking Japanese to come and till it. For decades, this had been an area where the interests of major powers clashed for primacy and privileges, none more important than the rivalry between Imperial Russia and Japan. In fact, it was the collapse of the Russian Empire and the weak position of the Soviet Union in its early years that enabled Japan to gain a foothold in Changchun, and greater Manchuria. Like the urge to build the Great East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere in haste, Japan's Manchurian dream was a product of its leaders' anxiety about missing the chance to gain a stronghold, a lifeline that would ensure the empire's existence. Perhaps sadness for this lost dream lies behind the nostalgia of some children of settlers and repatriates who even today look back with fondness on the distant fantasy of Manchukuo.

In his conclusion, Sewell calls for the incorporation of "the entire range" of stories of Japanese presence in Manchuria, "from the triumphant to the sorrowful" (197). This is sound advice for anyone interested in the conflicting histories of the Japanese Empire, which for too many decades have served to maintain grudges in Japan's former victims while feeding feelings of glorification and nostalgia among some Japanese groups.

The three books analyzed in this essay paint a picture of Japan's short-lived empire by not only providing memorable snapshots of its existence but also conveying the dynamics of imperial expansion and consolidation. They offer nuanced images of an imperial project harried by the changing battlefield fortunes and simply too short to gain and preserve a foothold in the lands it reached, or a place in the hearts and minds of the millions it tried to win over. This brief realm was not solely a product of pragmatic calculations, though the pompous rhetoric of liberation was often too thin a veneer to hide the imperialist aspirations of the Japanese. In adding new colors to the image of Japan's quest for a new order at home and abroad, the books authored by Yellen, Uchiyama, and Sewell become welcome additions to an expanding shelf of works on Japan's failed empire—to be used by specialists and students alike.

Reference

Aldrich, Robert, ed. 2020. *The Age of Empires*. London: Thames and Hudson.

About the Reviewer

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