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Kushner/The Thought War

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Propaganda for Everyone

Offstage a traditional three-piece Japanese instrumental band strikes up a tune. To a resonant drumbeat a *rakugo* performer slowly shuffles onstage, bowing as he approaches his seat cushion in the middle of the stage. It is a typical weeknight at Suehirotei, a popular *rakugo* and performance hall in the heart of Shinjuku, and the audience eagerly waits to see which comedy routine Kawayanagi Senryū will perform. Tucking his legs under himself and sitting down onstage, Senryū faces the audience, bows again, and smiles. He looks rather grandfatherly in his somber brown kimono, with his short-trimmed hair almost completely white. A few older patrons call out for him to repeat a favorite routine; he politely nods in their direction. Looking calmly at the audience, Senryū quickly breaks into a Japanese song from World War Two.

Hello, I am sorry to have not written for a while
I am doing better and better.
I'm not bragging but I do want to show you . . .
From the time I arrived here until today,
the marks on my helmet from the bullets flying around.¹

Senryū sings the entire popular wartime melody “Shanghai dayori” (Letter from Shanghai), whose lyrics take the form of a letter from a Japanese soldier at the battlefield near Shanghai. The jaunty words, along with the peppy, upbeat tempo, signal a military secure in its destiny.

Rakugo is at the same time a traditional and contemporary comedic performing art. Many performers, although they are dwindling in number, perform standard routines from a century ago and even before. But others have made their name performing completely new material divorced from the traditions. Anyone attending a performance of *rakugo* expects some of both kinds of routines. The audience pays one price for entry, but once in, people can stay all day and night to watch the shows. *Rakugo* also has a history of insensitivity and the desire to shock, so it is with this expectation that the audience experiences a delicious thrill when they hear wartime songs sung in the context of a comedy show.

Famed comedian Kawayanagi Senryū is known for his popular wartime song routine, and he performs it regularly throughout Japan. The routine is funny because it is over the top, filled with off-color humor. Ordinarily, no one today expects to hear wartime songs as part of a comedy show. The routine shocks patrons a little—just as traditional *rakugo* tried to do—and the singing itself is amusing because it seems so dated in today’s Japan, both completely disassociated from wartime Japan and inappropriate. Senryū sings, gestures, makes faces, and jitters about on his cushion, recapturing the mood of the past through the irony of today’s mindset.

A child during World War Two (1931–1945), Senryū now recreates the Japan of that time through the songs of the era. In his opening remarks he informs the audience that Japan easily won all its early battles so that a cheery, light mood permeated the countryside. Between 1931 and 1937, with relatively few military casualties, Japan took control of Manchuria and set up its own puppet empire, Manchukuo, so the songs from this early period exude an optimistic outlook regarding Japan’s mission in Asia. As Senryū gleefully sings the vibrant tunes, contemporary audiences experience the propaganda that propelled wartime Japanese society to mobilize.

But military victories alone did not monopolize the attention of Japanese audiences at that time. The early part of Senryū’s performance includes equally appealing wartime hits that trumpeted Japan’s role as “the light of Asia.” In 1940 Japan planned to host the Olympics and simultaneously celebrate the 2,600th year of the country’s founding. A song, “2,600th Year Imperial Anniversary,” became a radio favorite, marking Japan as more than a military powerhouse.

Under our just and commanding flag
We will create the Asia of tomorrow.
Today we demonstrate our power and perseverance
The imperial dynasty has reached its 2,600th year!²

When military losses slowly began to escalate after the Imperial Japanese Army invaded China in 1937, and then became bogged down there, the airy swing tunes gave way to positive, but slightly more somber songs. Senryū’s performance recreates the war’s progression, so now he sings the 1942 “Final Battle for Greater East Asia Song.” The lyrics explain how the home front and battlefield will be unified as one, with a “blistering and booming stride, the time for our country to rise has arrived.”³

By the start of the Pacific War against the ABCD bloc (the Americans, British, Chinese, and Dutch), Senryū tells his audience, the early heady jingles

give way to slower songs of more melancholy reflection and to patriotic eulogies. Senryū demonstrates the change with “Sinking the British Pacific Fleet” and “God Soldiers of the Sky.” By the war’s end, popular music had lost the optimism and vitality it had manifested during the previous decade, although hopefulness quickly returned during the American occupation.

Senryū’s routine demonstrates that contemporary Japanese audiences are titilated when recalling the wartime songs and propaganda that shaped and mobilized their wartime society.⁴ When singing the songs and swinging to the beat, Kawayanagi Senryū recognizes that his routine is part nostalgia, part sociological analysis. Older Japanese in the audience still remember parts of the songs and the era, while the young, jolted by their often ambivalent feelings associated with the war, laugh at the contrast between what the songs say and what was actually happening. The fact that these wartime songs remain in the public memory and motivate laughter (albeit often nervous) supports the fact that Japanese wartime propaganda was actually more effective than post-war scholars thought. Wartime Japanese propaganda helped mobilize Japanese society to establish an empire in Asia, and the propaganda lived on after Japan’s military defeat. Japanese wartime propaganda is not a dead issue.

A more careful analysis of wartime Japanese propaganda is important for two reasons. It illuminates the social psychology that helped Japan pursue its wartime aims. Second, it demonstrates that the Japanese populace in general were active participants and not mere followers of their government officials and military commanders.

Old wartime propaganda continues to exert an influence on Japan today. Over the last few years a conservative group in Japan that sponsors what it calls “antimasochistic history” has grown more vocal in its declarations that Japan liberated Asia prior to 1945 and ended western racist hegemony. The well-known Japanese manga artist Kobayashi Yoshinori has drawn innumerable comics illustrating this conservative group’s position. Kobayashi’s prolific output, including several volumes on World War Two and Japan’s role in Taiwan, consistently tops Japanese bestseller lists and ignites public debate.⁵ A close examination of Japanese wartime propaganda reflects its “everydayness,” which helps account for why it became a virtually unassailable part of the social consciousness that stabilized wartime Japanese society. Such an investigation also allows us to see more clearly why contemporary Japanese conservatives lament Japan’s decline as a military and political power player in Asia.

An analysis of propaganda is necessary to explain not only how the Japanese waged war for so long, but also why the same propaganda could help rebuild the country in the postwar era. A study of Japanese wartime propaganda helps to elucidate how a popular base to support the war in Asia was

formed, how it grew, and why it remained stable throughout Japan's Fifteen-Year War. Scholars have asked similar questions regarding the Nazi movement in Germany, but the Japanese case is more intriguing, for not only did Japan's propaganda war last longer, but the Japanese also never managed to establish a central authority like the Nazi's Ministry of Propaganda.⁶ Unlike Nazi Germany, a fascist party never took control of the government in Japan. Individual Japanese had to make a choice to participate in the developing war in China and later against the Allies.

Propaganda is a complex concept; it should not be considered merely an irrational web of deceit and lies. One theorist eloquently notes that propaganda "supplies ersatz certainties."⁷ To paraphrase several other theories, propaganda should not be thought of as persuasion, because persuasion is a dialogue based on reason that satisfies both parties. Propaganda, however, "is a deliberate attempt to shape perceptions to achieve a response that furthers a desired action."⁸ More importantly, propaganda appeals to emotion, while persuasion centers on logic. Propaganda is a collection of techniques used to influence mass opinion, and it therefore affects the social psychology of a population. A group mindset is a difficult ethos to form, but once established it proves even harder to eradicate. As historian of social science Minami Hiroshi articulated, "once a group mindset has been codified, individual opinions are overwhelmed by the social pressure to conform," and propaganda plays off of these psychological strengths.⁹ Propaganda is not always rational because the aim is to cause action, not reflection.

Propaganda also differs from education, although they share similarities. A strict definition of education is a system where the acquisition of knowledge is the goal and there is little speculation on how the knowledge will be used. The individual is free to employ the knowledge or ignore it. Propaganda, in contrast, seeks to impart knowledge with a specific end in mind.¹⁰ Education is not linked to specific psychological and media techniques to disseminate knowledge, whereas propaganda is intricately tied to certain technologies. For propaganda to succeed, media and technology must be carefully calibrated to galvanize action. Advertising is related to propaganda but pursues different goals. The advertising industry's intimate relationship with capitalism and the market makes its goal the stimulation of a desire to purchase a product or service even if the individual's needs have already been satisfied. Ads employ media and technological techniques that resemble those of propaganda, and they even influence the mass society, but advertising's aim is still to gain capital, while propaganda seeks to stimulate action.¹¹ Propaganda and advertising are not always mutually exclusive, as we shall see, but their goals are distinct.



A series of comics illustrating Japanese victories on the Chinese mainland in the magazine *Tabi* (Travel), December 1937, p. 72.

Japan's wartime propaganda pushed the nation to mobilize during World War Two to an extent that far surpassed many of the fascist states to which Japan was frequently compared. During its Fifteen-Year War this tiny island country with a population of approximately 70 million invaded China, carved out a puppet empire in northern China, occupied and colonized vast regions of Southeast Asia, and waged a bloody war not only against China but the United States, Great Britain, and Australia. Unlike Germany and Italy, no major portion of the Japanese population or intelligentsia fled, nor were there any major domestic revolts against the military incursions of the 1930 and 1940s.¹² The Japanese suffered privations, both personal and economic, yet during the fifteen-year battle for supremacy in Asia, the people of Japan remained committed to guarding and expanding its empire.

Japan's wartime propaganda centered on one major goal: unifying the battlefield with the home front. Numerous lesser goals, such as defeating racism and "liberating Asia," fed the main objective, but all the efforts helped create a symbiotic relationship between soldiers at the front and civilians throughout the empire in support of imperial expansion. Because of this relationship between home and battlefield, Japanese propaganda cannot be viewed solely in domestic terms. Moreover, the fact that the propaganda also focused on uniting disparate geographical locations and populations into a Japanese empire means that we must examine the propaganda as a tool for integrating Japan's wartime empire. War propaganda cannot be separated from imperial propaganda. To the Japanese of the 1930s, Japan's imperial goals were not chimeras—the population believed in its mission.

The Japanese did not confine propaganda to the upper levels of the military and bureaucracy. Instead, in support of the primary goal, plans called for propaganda that either sprang from society itself or was made to appear that way. Japanese on all levels of wartime society deemed reciprocity—alliances among the civilian, military, and bureaucratic circles—to be the key to successful propaganda campaigns. Reciprocity meant that Japanese society believed they had a role in producing propaganda in coordination with the government and military. The government did not simply mandate what society's actions should be. Mirroring the Japanese military and political realms at the time, no single organ for propaganda, no ministry of propaganda, existed. A Japanese counterpart to Joseph Goebbels, Nazi minister of propaganda, never appeared. Obviously, government and civilian organizational systems existed, but no single authority reigned over the entire propaganda apparatus the way Hitler and Goebbels ruled at the top of the Nazi propaganda pyramid. Hitler felt that propaganda messages should be kept simple and feed stereotypes. Goebbels supported Hitler's directive but remained adamant that propagan-

dists could not grow lax. Fresh propaganda was continually needed to maintain the Nazi party's roster of members and to inflame emotional attachment, even after the party grew strong.¹³

If the structure of Japanese propaganda differs from its Axis counterparts, it is perhaps even more unlike its American counterpart. Overall, in the west, the term propaganda carries a history of negative connotations. During World War Two, British diplomats assiduously tried to avoid using the term to describe their attempts to persuade America to join the war against the Nazis. Americans viewed propaganda as an antidemocratic activity that perverted the truth and distorted reality.¹⁴ As much as the Americans avoided the use of the term "propaganda," the Japanese employed it. The pursuit of democratic ideals did not hinder Japan's engagement of propaganda for the simple reason that the Asian nation had little, if any, desire to be democratic. Moreover, historically, propaganda had deep roots in Japan.

Innumerable studies in the English language focus on Nazi and Fascist propaganda, but there is little research on wartime Japanese propaganda.¹⁵ In the Japanese and Chinese languages research has proliferated in the last few years, but the emphasis still centers on domestic Japanese programs and glosses over how the propaganda manifested itself within the larger Japanese empire.¹⁶ These studies elucidate Japan's situation only at a theoretical level. It is true that Japanese wartime propaganda often appeared nebulous and Zen-like with its slogans concerning "spirit" and "national polity" (*seishin* and *kokutai*). Nonetheless, its actual effect at the local level in Japan—and even some propaganda directed toward the United States and China—demonstrates that Japanese propaganda exerted a broad and powerful influence.

Japanese wartime propaganda was diffuse, arising simultaneously from sectors as diverse as advertising and comedy. Because no single Japanese propaganda authority existed, and no central institution dominated the landscape, defining wartime Japanese propaganda can seem a hopeless academic exercise. It helps, therefore, to understand that propaganda has existed in Japan for centuries, but only with the advent of modern media did appeal to an instantaneous mass audience become possible.

Imperial Roots of Japanese Propaganda

For the Japanese the most important change that came with wartime propaganda was the shift from its Confucian antecedents. The Tokugawa era (1600–1868) had promoted classical Chinese notions of leadership and morality, with the shogun's administration, the bakufu, continually educating the people regarding correct social behavior. The Meiji government (1868–1912), no

longer bound by traditional social hierarchies, created a more broadly focused imperial bureaucracy, but one still bent on guiding the masses morally. Beginning in the 1900s the Japanese bureaucracy had transformed itself into a technologically astute staff that employed propaganda created by sociologists, media research analysts, and pollsters. By the early Shōwa era (1926–1989) the advent of radio, the proliferation of cinema, the arrival of wireless technology to transmit photos, airline transport, advancing print techniques and publishing tools had all increased the ways in which propaganda could manipulate the increasingly urban inhabitants of the expanding Japanese empire, including Taiwan and Korea. The ever-growing possibilities had far surpassed the government's ability to exercise complete control over propaganda. The Meiji model of government, in which elite bureaucrats educated the masses, became ineffective for a society about to go to war. In addition, unlike previous eras, wartime Japanese society made propaganda demands on its government when people saw a need for improved social control or more skillful manipulation of public opinion.

For a brief time the Japanese did not remain sequestered on the four main Japanese islands. A few decades after the Meiji Restoration the empire swelled to include Korea and Taiwan (Formosa). Japanese cultural policy in these two formal colonies differed greatly from later efforts in the expanded wartime empire, most notably with regard to local language and culture. Following the Allied victory in World War One, the Japanese received the mandate to control the Marshall islands, taking over Germany's charge. Between 1931 and 1942 the Japanese empire gradually extracted obeisance from Indochina, Burma, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Sakhalin, the Kurils, and numerous other islands dotting the Pacific. By the time the Japanese government solidified its Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere in 1942, Japan threatened land borders with India and Thailand and water borders with Australia and even the United States. To cover such diverse territories, Japan's propaganda could no longer remain monolingual and monolithic.¹⁷

As early as 1933 Japanese officials had declared that Japan aimed to liberate Asia. Although lifting the yoke of western imperialism, Japan found itself in an entirely new situation. It was now a colonial occupier promoting local and indigenous languages. Japan's older holdings, Korea and Taiwan, had faced harsh colonial strategies, which largely strove to eradicate the use of Korean and Chinese. In the new parts of the empire, however, lauding local culture was seen as a way of shedding dependence on western education and values, defined as "vile western imperialism." In these places Japan strove to "liberate" the populations, not to make Japanese out of the Burmese or Chinese. None-

theless, as other historians have argued, and Japanese archives reveal, wartime Japanese society did retain a strict hierarchical view of Asia in racial terms, with Japan at the apex.¹⁸

To show that its empire differed from western imperialism, Japanese officials and propaganda professionals had to strenuously avoid their prior monolingual and monocultural policies. Wartime imperial propaganda had to reflect the variety of languages and cultures that made up the empire. The hierarchical cultural organization of the empire, with Japan at the top, persuaded the mass Japanese audience to adhere to the war project. But the broad range of symbols used in the propaganda—such as physical strength, industrial capability, political stability, modern architecture, and advanced standards of hygiene—clearly indicates the extent to which wartime propaganda extended its influence throughout the Japanese empire in realms often removed from the military and the emperor.

Wartime Japanese theorists of propaganda—Kanda Kōichi, Yoneyama Keizō, Koyama Eizō, to name a few—wrote lengthy discourses on the nature of propaganda. These professional analysts were of the opinion that propaganda created by the masses, which emanated from the bottom of society, would prove successful in the long run for two reasons. First, if propaganda appeared to come as an official order, the people would resent it as a government proclamation. Second, the propagandists had noted that people behaved like all living creatures; they thought in terms of immediate benefits and disadvantages to themselves or how specific actions or policies would affect the future. It did not matter how much the media emphasized something vague and spiritual; in the end such things would not have the power to mobilize people.¹⁹ The people needed to be presented with concrete benefits that would arise from the imperial program.

The Japanese government also realized that effective propaganda did not grow out of explicit directives issued from its offices. Propaganda that could be counted on to mobilize had to “grasp the hearts and minds of the people,” *minshin haaku*. To do so, the government and military first had to establish a relationship with the people. Ultimately, this relationship rested on the unity of battlefield to home front and the reciprocal relations of propaganda campaigns activated throughout the Japanese empire.

Even with the clear goal of uniting the home front and battlefield, propaganda theorists understood why it was sometimes better for propaganda campaigns to originate from society instead of appearing as government mandates. The Japanese military and the government frequently encountered obstacles because of Japan’s multifaceted approach to propaganda. Since no single

agency had control, different agencies often competed with divergent messages for the same target audience. Within the military, the army competed with the navy; within bureaucratic circles, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs competed with the Office of the Prime Minister, the Diet, and various cabinet agencies that arose to conduct propaganda campaigns. During World War Two, the United States faced similar difficulties. Numerous offices like the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the Office of War Information (OWI), other independent military and civilian agencies such as the Allied Translator and Interpreter Section (ATIS, the US military translating bureau in the Pacific) and even Hollywood censorship boards competed for a piece of the propaganda action.

Wartime Japanese propaganda has frequently been labeled a failure, but I maintain that Japan was a “successful failure” because wartime Japanese propaganda did not cease at the end of the war with the fall of the Japanese empire. Not only did wartime Japanese propaganda stoke the fires of a battle that raged for fifteen years, but more importantly, the same propaganda also helped Japan accept the defeat, urged Japan to rebuild in the immediate postwar, and assuaged a Japanese psyche that later erected the world’s second largest economy. How wartime Japanese propaganda achieved this is far from a dormant issue, and it behooves us to examine the topic more carefully.

Imperial Propaganda as War Propaganda

Japanese wartime propaganda developed out of a dynamic interaction between official propaganda policy and the people. This symbiotic relationship between plan and reality often grew rancorous. Japan readied itself for war in a myriad of ways, with a variety of appealing messages for all groups. With few exceptions, wartime Japan rarely experienced charismatic political personalities who galvanized the nation. Japan did not experience a cult of Stalin, Hitler, or Mussolini. At the same time, although a bucktoothed emperor and a caricature of General Tōjō Hideki became central to US propaganda against Japan, comparable figures never played a principal role in domestic Japanese propaganda. Instead, Japan became obsessed with its vision of the future. For a few—the staunch militarists and imperialists—the emperor may have remained the central icon behind mobilization for the war. Indeed, after the war former Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro committed suicide, and General Tōjō attempted it, but most military as well as most civilians accepted defeat and went on with their lives. For the vast majority, Japan’s war propaganda had stimulated feelings not about the emperor, but about Japan’s modernity that they believed

culminated in a beneficent empire. Wartime Japanese society envisioned the empire, with Japan at its pinnacle, as hygienic, progressive, scientific, the har-binger of civilization that Asia should strive to emulate. Japanese wartime propaganda unified the public to support this idea of a modern empire while aiding the war effort, and the idea of empire became crucial to the success of wartime propaganda.

Japan launched its first imperial experiment when it acquired Taiwan from the Qing court following the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895. Within a decade Japan had defeated the Russians and later obtained large land leases in northern China. By the time full-scale war with China exploded in the summer of 1937, the Japanese empire was already several decades old. During these war-time years, Japanese propaganda should not be seen as mere war propaganda—it was imperial propaganda.

Japan administered an empire for a half a century, but contemporary scholars and the Japanese public have not dealt adequately with the issue of how empire intersects with propaganda. In fact, the notion that wartime propaganda is a special extension of imperial propaganda explains how Japan's wartime propaganda structure did not just suddenly appear in the 1930s when Japan began to face what it called its crises, or *hijōji*. The Japanese propaganda of World War Two is actually a subset of the imperial propaganda project that dates back to the 1890s. Although this book examines only the propaganda from 1931–1945, long before the start of the war with China the idea of empire attracted well-known writers, politicians, educators, and businessmen to imperial propaganda, and these people maintained their interest even after Japan's defeat. In the first decades of the twentieth century, not only did many of the nonmilitary educated Japanese elite support Japan's imperial aims, but Japan's message of "Asia for the Asiatics" also held broad popular appeal.

Domestic Japanese propaganda slogans alone did not motivate the population to wage war for a decade and a half.²⁰ In line with the Japanese prescription that empty rhetoric mobilized few, wartime propaganda often specifically depicted an advanced and modern Japan. This image suffused the daily routine, crossed oceans, traversed cultures, and influenced ideologies. The propaganda was so potent that its legacy persists today. In contemporary Japanese society the advertising slogan that frugality helped the war effort—"luxury is the enemy"—is still remembered by those who lived through the war. In contrast, it is interesting to note that "the Emperor whom the wartime generation had been taught to worship as a living god, and in whose name so many had died," was rarely mentioned by individuals at the time as a motivating factor behind Japanese support for the war.²¹

A cross section of urban and rural Japanese created Japanese wartime propaganda. Propaganda provided an outlet for motivated advertisers to work for the government and sponsor new magazines. Intellectuals debated the merits of wartime propaganda, discussing ways to better mobilize the country. The elite published articles on such themes not only in government journals but also in popular magazines and newspapers for the nation's readers to digest. Obviously Japan failed ultimately in its military conquest, but military failure denotes only that. Militaries quickly demobilize, whereas societies do not. Wartime propaganda ideals had become so much a part of Japanese daily life that many of its effects lasted well beyond the surrender and even the occupation.

As in Vichy France, many Japanese embraced the war in the early years because Japan seemed to be the winning side. In the beginning of the Nazi seizure of Europe, it was highly likely that many French were collaborationist, just as by mid-1944, when the tide turned, many switched allegiance to the Free French.²² It is true that many French may have engaged in *realpolitik* and felt they had no choice, even though many historians take issue with that conclusion. However, in contrast to Vichy, Japanese continued to mobilize and support the war even when the situation appeared increasingly hopeless from 1943 until the surrender in August 1945. The Japanese fervor for war cannot only be explained by *realpolitik*, given the fact that enthusiasm lasted well beyond the time when winning appeared as a salvageable option.

Wartime Japanese propaganda developed through trial and error and also through competition. Moreover, it took place within the various domains of the Japanese empire. Propaganda campaigns that worked in China or met with resistance there often influenced domestic decisions, while domestic mobilization programs that achieved good results often carried over across to the Asian continent and elsewhere.

Reports sent back from Japanese propaganda platoons in China and Southeast Asia continually influenced the way in which Japan mobilized the domestic population. These exchanges spurred the continual development of new propaganda plans and methodologies. This production of propaganda and feedback about its effectiveness did not always translate into a centralized administration throughout the empire on the Japanese side, but Japanese propaganda remained a potent force.²³ During the war and for some after they achieved independence, leaders in Burma, India, the Philippines, and Indonesia employed Japanese rhetoric and often accepted Japanese assistance to further their own causes. Even Vietnamese patriots recognized some of the validity in Japanese propaganda claims while opposing the war's aims.²⁴

False Accusations

As much as some pan-Asianists like Indian Independence leader Chandra Bose and Burmese Prime Minister Ba Maw supported elements of Japanese propaganda, wartime Japanese propaganda is still poorly understood. Americans caricatured Japanese wartime propaganda, hampering later analyses. They considered the English-language propaganda the Japanese produced to be inept.²⁵ And indeed, Japanese propaganda in English frequently appeared incompetent. American GIs who saw Japanese efforts firsthand fueled much of this sentiment. One Japanese leaflet, for example, had a beautiful nude woman on one side (presumably to command the soldiers' attention initially) and on the other listed thirteen "dangerous actions." The leaflet apparently sought to scare the soldiers, but the sheet had such outlandish content and so many grievous spelling errors that it probably became the butt of many platoon jokes. "Don't fall into the habit of glancing sideways at your comrades in arms," the leaflet warned. "Your surgeon dislikes such a habit, as it predicts the approaching menace of neurosis." Nothing, however, produced more guffaws than "Don't eat your own excrement or drink your own urine in the presence of others. If you do, you are sure to be branded a lunatic, however warmly you may protest."²⁶

Allied soldiers were not the only parties who believed the Japanese incapable of effective wartime propaganda. In a postwar book, Phyllis Argall, a resident of Japan in the 1930s, felt the need to criticize several Japanese government agencies that produced English-language propaganda for dissemination abroad. One Japanese agency, for example, failed to grasp the double meaning of the statement: "The Welfare Minister promised to do all in his power to increase the birthrate on the train to Atami, and stated that public funds would be available for that purpose."²⁷

After the war, the popular American fixation on Japanese propaganda as the work of the *yakuza*, the Japanese mafia, and the secretive Black Dragon Society obfuscated the real story.²⁸ Marius Jansen's treatise on Sun Yat Sen and the Japanese demonstrates that strong connections did exist between underworld figures from China and Japan; a conspiracy, however, did not.²⁹ The American obsession with the Black Dragon Society and organizations of that ilk, as the instigators of the war, ran deep throughout the Allied occupying forces. The postwar interrogation of General Doihara Kenji, the supposed Lawrence of Arabia of the East, demonstrates the extent to which the occupation forces believed this myth. The reports make it seem as if the occupation forces almost needed him to admit that the Manchurian Incident and the

Black Dragons were connected.³⁰ The skewed American perception of Japanese propaganda prevented the United States from recognizing that Japanese propaganda was not relegated to a small junta of military men, bent on evil machinations. The agencies that actually drafted, produced, and distributed Japanese wartime propaganda consisted of well-intentioned intellectuals, rural women, stage performers, police officers, and other average Japanese eagerly participating in a society that wanted to support the war. The entire propaganda structure was grounded outside of the government.

Japanese wartime propaganda evolved over decades, as the product of empire-building. Published Japanese comedy routines about the war sold well during the first Sino-Japanese war (1894–1895); pamphlets mocked the Chinese and colorful pictures depicted battlefield victories.³¹ During the Russo-Japanese war Japanese authorities prevented foreign journalists like Jack London from observing the war firsthand. However, pictures championing Japan's victories drawn by Japanese journalists and military artists were readily available to rural and urban consumers.³² In what became a standard operating procedure later on, the Japanese government during the Sino-Japanese war paid Reuters bribes to print articles that portrayed the Japanese in a positive light. Japanese officials solicited American news reporters with offers of high salaries to speak favorably of Japan in both domestic and international papers. The Japanese government took these measures in response to negative international press after the massacre of Chinese troops and civilians at Port Arthur in late November 1894.³³

In the early 1930s Japan's reliance on social mobilization to solve political problems played into Japan's escalating militarism and added to the Japanese desire to look beyond politics for the answer to Japan's problems. The preconditions for the rise of Japanese militarism—an emasculated political realm and a beleaguered economy—were already well in place by the time of the Manchurian Incident on September 18, 1931. Throughout the 1920s labor- and rural-based political parties continually failed to create a stable political coalition. By the early 1930s a stumbling economy and strengthened military had forced the political parties into a defensive posture. When Japan's Kwantung Army in China realized that the civilian government back home had no ability to hinder its expansionist goals, military aggression on the Chinese mainland continued to escalate.

For the domestic population, the gnawing sense that social unrest was imminent fed social anxiety to seek answers beyond the apparently inept civilian government. Disgruntled military personnel, imperialist politicians, and dissatisfied portions of the public therefore took it upon themselves to change

a political system they deemed inadequate. Between 1921 and 1936 mutinous Japanese assassinated a half dozen government ministers in office. These actions destabilized an already precarious situation. Japanese socialist and communist efforts to oppose the government provided the upper classes with even more reason to fear domestic unrest.³⁴

The Thought War

During the restless 1930s Japanese propaganda efforts on the part of all parties multiplied exponentially. Japanese authorities had become aware of the need to maintain popular support when they sent masses of forces to China in 1932 and 1937 and later when war began against the Allies in 1941. This large-scale dispatch of forces helped to increase bureaucratic, civilian, and military attention to propaganda.

For Japan, the entire process of convincing China that Japan's mission was to liberate Asia hinged on the idea of the "thought war," or *shisōsen*.³⁵ The Japanese consistently used the term "thought war" to describe the fight for ideological supremacy in Asia and later against the West. As one wartime author described it, Japan waged war over various differences in "world view," most importantly against democracy and individualism.

What kind of ideology is democracy? It is an ideology that bases itself on the individual. It is an ideology that began for the existence of the individual, for the individual's profit, and to protect the individual. If one promotes this idea, we will end up with a society wherein women and men are equals, the old and young, adults and children, are all treated as separate individuals. This will lead to conflict.³⁶

Civilian and military leaders in Japan constantly spoke of the need for action in the thought war, and the duty to refine and hone their propaganda skills. Realizing that the public could not be ignored, government officials wanted the population to be enthusiastic about the war. Leaders saw propaganda as a force behind stimulating and supporting such enthusiasm.

Wartime Japanese propaganda created an image of Japan as the modern leader of Asia. The Japanese people believed the propaganda because that image reflected a Japan that could guide Asia through the twentieth century. While the goal of Japanese propaganda was to unite the military front and the home front, wartime Japanese propaganda remained effective for three main reasons. First, the production of wartime propaganda was not limited to mil-

itary and fascist circles. The men and women who wrote and produced the propaganda came from a range of backgrounds. These bureaucrats, writers, photographers, and advertisers also had a variety of rationales for accepting or helping to develop the propaganda. Fear of opposing the government played a role, but many Japanese also believed in Japan's mission of modernity in Asia. Second, wartime propaganda seeped into the fabric of daily wartime life, and civilians cooperated in its growth. Japanese propaganda worked at many different levels of society and across many different venues. The propaganda appealed to a mass audience, but that audience also helped produce the propaganda. Comedians voluntarily employed propaganda terminology in their routines. Rural inhabitants wrote letters to magazines and to their government representatives, enthusiastically offering suggestions for improved propaganda. Third, no organization took domestic support for the war's aims for granted. The Japanese worked tirelessly throughout the war and afterward to mobilize the population. Bureaucratic agencies continually monitored the populace for dissatisfaction. The police constantly took the pulse of the people, trying to assess their understanding of the war's aims and requesting feedback through interviews, interrogations, questionnaires, and eavesdropping. Even the Japanese military believed that it had to stay constantly in tune with the public psyche. The Japanese military commissioned innumerable military and civilian studies that monitored and gauged public opinion.

Japanese wartime propaganda developed like a spoked wheel. The authorities provided the center hub with their plans and programs. The population provided the structure that supported and reinforced. Without both parts the resulting propaganda would have collapsed.

This book consists of six chapters, each describing an element within wartime Japanese propaganda. Chapter One discusses the evolution of propaganda as a profession in Japan. Detailing the underlying rationale behind the propaganda initiatives assists in understanding the goals Japanese propaganda espoused. Chapter Two analyzes how the police and the military defined the socially acceptable, and how, through their supervisory role, they watched society for signs of dissatisfaction and malcontents. Chapter Three looks at the advertising industry's propaganda products. Censorship helped to stifle recalcitrant social elements, but without a forceful visual representation of their goals, the propagandist's efforts would have been hampered. The relationship between the advertising industry and Japanese authorities explains how Japan propagated its image as the leader and modernizer in Asia. The fourth chapter explores how popular culture and the entertainment industry supported the war. Japanese wartime propaganda did not confine itself to slogans and

government-sponsored exhibitions. Successful professional entertainers often incorporated wartime propaganda as part of their own routines to help popularize their careers. These propaganda messages filtered down to the society and took hold. Chapter Five explains how Japanese propaganda dealt with the competition it faced abroad. How exactly did China and the United States react to Japanese propaganda efforts and what did these responses reveal? The Japanese government and military became keenly aware that Japanese abroad faced a threat from foreign propaganda, so they sought to combat such efforts with propaganda that was both defensive and proactive. Even though the Japanese empire controlled more ground than just China and threatened more countries than just the United States, I focus on the responses of these two nations for two reasons: the Chinese posed the largest and greatest propaganda threat to the Japanese, and proved more difficult to convince than the Japanese had originally anticipated. Analyzing the Chinese response to Japanese propaganda helps us fathom the obstacles that Japanese wartime propaganda faced within its empire. America, on the other hand, presented the greatest military threat to the Japanese. In addition, American culture and history were so far removed from the Japanese and average Asian experience that the United States, too, stood as a major obstacle, impeding the claims of Japanese propaganda. It grew difficult in some regions to claim the Japanese were bringing liberty for Asians, taking them out from under the tyranny of white rule, while the Japanese themselves instituted much of the same racial hierarchy they supposedly disparaged. While Japan could essentially ignore Burmese, British, and Philippine propaganda threats because these countries were not as militarily powerful or culturally dominant in Asia, it could not as easily dismiss the Americans and Chinese. Chapter Six seeks to explain connections between wartime and postwar Japanese propaganda. The Japanese prepared for defeat using many of the same propaganda agencies and techniques that had been employed during the war. The individuals who worked for these agencies later worked in positions of power and shaped the postwar Japanese media and advertising industries.

Postwar Japanese commentary on wartime Japanese propaganda has generated a failure myth that asserts Japan lacked efficient propaganda programs. Until recently this myth masked the actual scope and effectiveness of the propaganda projects. The very structure of the Tokyo War Crimes Trials forced many to examine only what the Japanese military had done, but not at relations among the government bureaus or reactions from the private sector. The key to understanding the full range and depth of wartime Japanese propaganda and its impact on postwar Japan requires that we look beyond the military.

Advertising agencies became subcontractors for military poster campaigns. Comedians and entertainers unilaterally mobilized themselves to travel to China and amuse the Japanese imperial troops. Youth groups and children conducted recycling campaigns, and married women's associations collected records and books to send to wounded soldiers. Japanese propaganda poured from a multiplicity of official and nonofficial venues.

The Japanese supported a war that lasted fifteen years and stretched to include virtually half the globe. A war of this magnitude, ferocity, and breadth demanded active participation from a population that believed in the cause. Although the war years were often bleak, that was not the only image, nor does it adequately describe wartime Japanese society.