

Workshop

Revisiting the Asia-Pacific War in Japan: Cultural Artifacts and Intellectual Discourse

Organizer: Carolin Fleischer-Heininger

Date: July 18, 2025, 15:00 – 17:30 JST

Venue: DIJ Tokyo (on-site event)

On-site participation: please register via email to fleischer-heininger@dijtokyo.org until July 16, 2025

On November 11, 2024, the Nobel Committee decided to award the Nobel Peace Prize for 2024 to the anti-nuclear weapons movement Nihon Hidankyō. This decision not only acknowledged the movement's ongoing commitment, shaped by its members' traumatic experiences of 'Hiroshima' and 'Nagasaki'. It was also an attempt to shape the present and imaginatively construct possible livable futures.

The past is neither finished nor finishable; nor is it history which is re-written time and again. The revisitation of history, which every generation undertakes anew, is profoundly influenced by trends and shifts in research theory and practice, as well as by socio-political transformations and significant events, often debated as *cesura*.

Consequently, historiography is both something that is made and – as Clifford Geertz (2000: 18) elaborates – a story that is essential for intellectuals to engage with the political situations surrounding them. Accordingly, the representation of 'the past' always emerges from a volatile and dynamic present, and is thus fleeting and unstable, as Walter Benjamin argues in "On the Concept of History" (1942).

Likewise, written history is often considered a fiction that primarily contributes to the formation, stabilization, and self-assertion of nation-states. In Japan, dominant historical narratives, such as Japanese victimization, have been foundational since the post-war period. We explore how these narratives, which inherently claim universality and unambiguity, are being selectively contested by cultural artifacts and counter discourses.

Program

Chair: Keyao “Kyle” Pan (Florida International University)

15:00 – 15:05

Welcome address

Franz Waldenberger (DIJ Tokyo)

15:05 – 15:20

Welcome & Introduction

Carolyn Fleischer-Heininger (DIJ Tokyo) and Keyao “Kyle” Pan (Florida International University)

15:20 – 15:50

Paper 1: Allegories of *Godzilla*

Tetsuya Kobayashi (Kyōto University)

The history of post-war Japan can be depicted as a conflict between a politically dominant discourse trying to make people forget past mistakes and tragedies and an alternative narrative aiming to preserve memory of these. Within the scope of the dominant discourse, which seeks to avoid conflict with the US and eliminate any elements that might invite criticism of the current system, past failures are portrayed as natural phenomena rather than anthropogenic. People forget “the true image of the past” that flits by (Benjamin).

The Japanese film *Godzilla* (1954) can be understood as an attempt to preserve memories of tragedy and anger. The monster that was revived by a nuclear test functions as an allegory. It could represent a natural disaster, the bombing by the US military, the product of self-righteous scientific omnipotence, or the lamentation and anger of the Japanese soldiers who died in battle in the Pacific. In the circumstances of the time, the film can be read as a protest against the hydrogen bomb test that had just taken place. But such critical moments were weakened in later series as the campaign for the ‘peaceful use of nuclear power’ became more successful.

In my presentation, I compare *Godzilla* with other films – such as *The Emperor’s Naked Army Marches On* (1987) and the Korean monster movie *The Host* (2006) – to clarify the strengths and weaknesses of the allegorical expression seen in *Godzilla*.

16:00 – 16:30

Paper 2: Anti-heroism and Trauma in Mizuki Shigeru's *Haisōki* (1970)

Felix Spremberg (Ghent University)

In Japan's contested war memories, the visual culture of mangaka Mizuki Shigeru (1922–2015) plays a prominent role in transmitting the trauma of war and offers a powerful critique of militarism and authoritarian leadership. In this presentation, I will focus on the semi-autobiographical manga *Haisōki* (*Chronicle of a Rout*, 1970), a lesser-known predecessor of the famous *Sōin gyokusai seyo!* (*On Towards Our Noble Deaths*, 1973), in which the author narrates his traumatic experiences on the battlefield in New Guinea. I will examine the discursive strategies and tropes employed to convey anti-heroism and trauma, most notably the traumas of abandonment and senselessness. I also argue that by casting war itself as the ultimate evil and by hiding the suffering of non-Japanese, namely of the local inhabitants, the manga remains within the limits of the sayable in Japanese war memory. As in other popular cultural works, a message of “never again!” is conveyed without suggesting how.

16:30 – 17:00

Paper 3: Terayama Shūji's *Tare ka kokyō o omowazaru* (1969) as Objection to History

Carolin Fleischer-Heininger (DIJ Tokyo)

Terayama Shūji (1935–1983) is one of the most prolific and innovative, yet also controversial figures in post-war Japanese culture. His biography and works are closely intertwined with the upheavals and ambivalences of post-war Japan. Always skeptical of the simplifying or sanitizing tendencies of historical narratives, he explored Japanese history, the nature and function of history, and its relation to memory.

Terayama's auto-fictional prose text *Tare ka kokyō o omowazaru* (*Who Does Not Think of Home*, 1969) can be considered a historical document that episodically recounts biographical events from the years 1936 to 1969, which are also an integral part of 20th-century Japanese history. Referencing Oswald A. G. Spengler, the text conceives history as a vibrant construct shaped by historians, blurring the lines between historical fact and fiction.

I examine how *Tare ka kokyō o omowazaru* dismantles the assumption of a unifying, identity-forming narrative of history through various individual stories. Through close reading and literary historical contextualization, I show that this dismantling occurs according to a narrative pattern of, firstly, questioning sources and contemporary testimonies, secondly, scrutinizing the meaning and relevance of historical narratives, and

thirdly, omitting and substituting historical narratives with trivial episodes that are presented as no less relevant to the individual.

17:00 – 17:30

Wrap-up & Discussion

Discussant: Julia Mariko Jacoby (Hitotsubashi University)