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### **Teaching Japanese Youth to be Loyal and Nationalist: Children’s Education, Folklore, and Propaganda (1939-1945)**

**Abstract.** This paper addresses the propagandistic nature of Japanese education and the meddling of local folklores during the Pacific War Era to influence the mindsets of youths. Cultivating a loyalist mindset in children was a strategy utilized to create future loyalist adults and soldiers.

**Keywords:** *Japan, Japanese youth, children’s education, teaching, propaganda, folklore, Pacific War Era, World War II.*

The Pacific War was a tumultuous turning point for the trajectory of Japanese politics, economics, and culture. Obviously, any powerful entity involved in this conflict utilized propaganda to influence public opinion and mindset. Therefore, influencing and educating children would shape the mindset of future adults, as those children will grow up to be the next teachers, politicians, soldiers, and public workers. The Japanese government pushed for infusing propaganda in children’s culture through formal school education and transforming the messages of classic folklore and tales to create a proud, nationalist, ready-to-fight population.

Even before the Pacific War period, Japan had been a warfare state, considering its warring against China from 1894–1895 and from 1931–1945, conflict with Russia from 1904–1905, and its colonizing of Korea<sup>1</sup>. As for the Pacific War (1931–1945), Japan had withdrawn from the League of Nations as well as other international agreements, invaded China, and attacked Pearl Harbor. After involving the United States, the Pacific War was marked with “racism, cultural misunderstanding, and sheer mercilessness”<sup>2</sup>. Before their unconditional surrender, the Japanese were known for their severe fighting, devotion to their nation, and Kamikaze mindset. Because of the brutal fighting and violence, there was a massive death toll, and, in 1945 the United States and Allies dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, causing massive amounts of civilian deaths. The Pacific War, and the Japanese attitude toward it, can be understood through their patriotic culture and definition of heroism being synonymous with martyrdom for their country.

In order to breed such a proud, nationalist attitude, the Japanese government had been pushing for formal education to glorify warfare and emphasize self-sacrifice for the state. Therefore, The Ministry of Education, a Japanese government entity, utilized its ability to set curriculum standards to teach children about the value of sacrifice and about disdain for an enemy. Japan’s Ministry of Education set a common standard of curricula for the entire country to follow, yet schools had the freedom to interpret those curriculum standards as they found

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<sup>1</sup> Brett L. Walker. (2015). *The Pacific War, 1931 – 1945. A Concise History of Japan*, Chapter 13, Cambridge University Press, 240.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 240-241.

appropriate “decid[ing] the Courses of Study, provid[ing] the basic framework for curricula, and approv[ing] the textbooks”<sup>3</sup>. Although there seemed to be freedoms for schools to interpret the curriculum, in practice, all Japanese schools had to follow what was nationally asserted. “Since the use of officially authorized texts in the nation’s schools was mandatory, the government effectively decided the entire content of education for these grades”<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, all the militaristic teachings in schools were purposeful; this government entity wanted children to support the war and be ready to fight as soon as they were old enough.

The indoctrination of patriotism through formal education was amplified during the Pacific War period and can be shown through the integration of militarism into the education system. In turn, this was an investment to foster a mindset in children that could be put into practice as adults. In fact, the Ministry of Education’s “emphasis on militarism in the curriculum, combined with the media’s glorification of war and the government’s suppression of pacifist and liberal views, was a major factor in socializing the great majority of Japanese to support aggression enthusiastically”<sup>5</sup>. The suppression of peaceful and anti-war sentiments increases the effectiveness of efforts to indoctrinate aggressive patriotism. By not allowing peaceful sentiments to receive public attention, it gives the appearance nationally that no one holds those notions. For children and even young adolescents, this has a massive bearing on their mental growth and the ideas they adopt. While growing up, they will never see people supporting peaceful nationalism, which translates to them assuming simply no one practices nationalism in a pacifistic manner. Thus, even children with innately peaceful dispositions will be pulled by the herd mentality into supporting aggressive nationalism. Hence, a huge contributing factor to the readiness of Japanese soldiers to fight and die for their country was how heavily education and media shaped Japan’s nationalistic culture.

For example, elementary-age children would read textbooks and stories infused with militaristic ideologies. In 1938, there were many accounts of language textbooks’ content revolving around the militarist phrases like “army flags”, “Advance!”, “risking death for the empire”, and “submarine”. First through third-grade students would also draw flags “ripped by bullet holes” in these language lessons<sup>6</sup>. Japanese youth were taught about key military jargon, from an early age. In addition, older elementary children “read about Major Tachibana...who ignored the danger and lead his troops under a “hail of enemy bullets”<sup>7</sup>. Within primary education, children were exposed to the stories and folklore of war heroes who were brave and who were martyrs. Therefore, the Ministry of Education was already infusing warlike ideas into the elementary curriculum, defining heroism and deeming what was important knowledge for Japanese youth; thus, setting the tone for society’s definition of valor, bravery, and emphasis on military erudition.

The Ministry of Education also mandated the study of the Kokutai no Hongi in schools. In 1937, the pamphlet was integrated into this national curriculum, proving to be “anti-foreign”,

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<sup>3</sup> Ikeno, Norio. (December 2005). Citizenship Education. Japan After World War II. *International Journal of Citizenship and Teacher Education*. 1, no. 2.

<https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.514.4400&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Ienaga, Saburo. (1993). The Glorification of War in Japanese Education. *International Security*. 18, 3, 115.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 121.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

emphasizing “complete loyalty to the Emperor”<sup>8</sup>. The Ministry of Education had enforced this propaganda pamphlet to be taught to children, in order to define a cultural universality in understanding the definition of loyalty and nationalism. In fact, in the *Kokutai no Hongi* there is an entire section entitled “Loyalty and Patriotism”, where it is written that “loyalty means to revere the emperor as [our] pivot to follow him implicitly.... hence, offering our lives for the sake of the emperor...[is] the casting aside of our little selves to live under his august grace enhancing the genuine life of the people of the state....”<sup>9</sup>. Here, the cultural understanding of loyalty and patriotism, in propaganda, and government-enforced education, is that true loyalty is to be a martyr for his or her Emperor for the general welfare of the state.

In addition to education was the utilization of fairytales and children’s stories as propaganda to mobilize fear, influencing children to fear a foreign enemy and to fight against them. The classic Japanese fairytale, “Momotaro”, for example, follows the “Son of a Peach”, who magically is born from peach to be the son of an elderly couple who has no children. By fifteen, he was fabled to be incredibly strong, handsome, and wise, making him the ideal hero for children to embolize in a story. This protagonist declares war on an Island of Devils, located northeast of Japan. Momotaro himself declared that “they are not only very wicked but they are disloyal to our Emperor and disobey his laws”<sup>10</sup>. Then, the protagonist gathers a band to fight these devils including a dog, monkey, and bird. After venturing into the sea, they conquered the demons. This illustrates the epitome of Japanese usage of folklore to influence children. As children listen to and read stories, they see themselves in each character they learn of. Japanese characters and figures in stories were deliberately contrived to represent all the things most important to a loyal nationalist and keeping wary of the enemy as well. These stories exhibit characters such as Momotaro that embody the Japanese government’s vision of an ideal citizen which further indoctrinates children into being like their storybook hero and consequently being the citizen the government desired of them.

“Momotaro” or “the Story of the Son of a Peach” might be a childhood fairytale, but it became utilized for a growing militaristic society at war. Although written in the late Muromachi period, the tale had continued to receive modifications and changes in media presentation, in order to consistently have children as its audience. For example, “Momotaro” was published as a children’s book in the Tokugawa period, then hundreds of years later it was screened as a film in 1943 and had a sequel in 1945, where it was utilized for wartime, children’s propaganda. The government had made sure that children were exposed to the story in more than just storybooks.

“Momotaro,” through varying time periods in which the narrative existed, represented a Japan that fought the corrupt, foreign enemy. In 1945, Momotaro wears a Japanese uniform, while attacking Pearl Harbor alongside his animal army<sup>11</sup>, and in the 1943 film “he leads an army made up of rabbits, dogs, and other domesticated animals (the Japanese) as they train wild

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<sup>8</sup> Beasley, W.G. (1949). *International Affairs* review of *Kokutai No Hongi: Cardinal Principles of the National Entity of Japan*. edited by Robert King Hall, John Owen Gauntlett.

<sup>9</sup> *Kokutai no hongii* (Fundamentals of our National Polity). (2005). *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, edited by Wm. Theodore de Bary, Carol Gluck, and Arthur L. Tiedemann, New York: Columbia University Press. 968-969, 975.

<sup>10</sup> *Momotaro, or the Story of the Son of a Peach*. 1908. *Japanese Fairytales*, 1-9. Florida Center for Instructional Theory.

<sup>11</sup> *Seo, Mitsuyo*. (1945). *Momotaro, sacred sailors*.

animals like elephants and crocodiles (South Seas islanders) to destroy a devilish enemy (the British) in a battle representing the fall of Singapore”<sup>12</sup>. “Momotaro” had been utilized to influence the mindsets of children. In fact, the films helped create a distinctly Japanese identity for wartime children to understand. “It is crucial to recognize that such efforts at identity construction are constantly contravened by and interconnected with otherness”, and in this context, the “otherness” was “the signifying system of the enemy country – the United States”<sup>13</sup>. Although throughout its existence as a tale, Japanese Momotaro fought the foreign “antagonists”, the revival of the folklore to be played on screen made it modern and accessible to children. The purpose of this was to communicate the ideal Japanese identity to children, one where the Japanese are heroic, fighters, and defend their nation and emperor.

Mobilizing popular culture to justify a war effort, has proven effective, especially in influencing the mindset of children. As shown through the evolution of this tale from oral tradition, to written prints, to being published in a children’s book, to becoming a movie, stories can be communicated in any form of media appropriate for the time. Therefore, in World War II, it was a genius of the government to put “Momotaro” on the big screens, depicting the British as the ogres and Japan as Momotaro.

During the Pacific War, Japanese culture was marked by nationalism, where loyalty to the emperor was synonymous with loyalty to the welfare of the state. To create such a universal mindset, formal education, folklore, and media and been utilized to influence the mindsets of children. The Ministry of Education had the ability to heavily saturate the curriculum with military jargon and national loyalty as exhibited in Kokutai no Hongi. Folklore about Major Tachibana and Momotaro showed fearless heroes who fought against the foreign enemy. Even more so, the Pacific War Era was marked by the mobilization of such a mindset, as shown by the propagandistic war films about Momotaro. Overall, children’s media and education were used as mediums to communicate a message to mold mindset and culture. Japanese children in the Pacific War Era were indoctrinated with nationalist values and loyalty to their country.

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<sup>12</sup> Tierney, Robert. (2010). The Adventures of Momotarō in the South Seas: Folklore, Colonial Policy, Parody. *Tropics of Savagery: The Culture of Japanese Empire in Comparative Frame*. University of California Press, 110-146. [www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pp80q.7](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pp80q.7).

<sup>13</sup> Hikari, Hori. (2017). The Dream of Japanese National Animation. *Promiscuous Media: Film and Visual Culture in Imperial Japan, 1926 – 1945*. Cornell University Press, 157.

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