War and Japan: The Non-Fiction Manga of Mizuki Shigeru

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Many Japanese neonationalists contend that it is “masochistic” to look critically at the nation’s wars of the 1930s and 1940s. They assume that criticism of Japanese militarism and love of the country and its traditions are somehow mutually exclusive. In place of an honest look at past crimes, revisionists present Japan as a victim, originally of Western imperialism, and now of a conspiracy of defamation by its neighbors.

Manga artist Mizuki Shigeru (b. 1922), creator of the famous supernatural series GeGeGe no Kitaro, is one individual who could not be blamed for feeling like a victim. A veteran of the fighting in the South Pacific, Mizuki was felled by malaria and lost his left arm in an American air raid. He suffered life-long health effects from the abuse he endured as a new recruit. Mizuki, however, has not slipped into a comfortable “victim’s view” of the war. Through non-fiction manga, Mizuki has explored the full range of Japanese war experience, seeking to reconcile images of Japanese as victims of their own elites and victimizers of others.

Mizuki in front of drawings of some of his most famous characters

Mizuki is also one of postwar Japan’s most prolific and influential interpreters of traditional ghost stories and folklore. He wrote that he wanted Japanese ghosts, previously thought of as grotesque or the products of an undignified plebian tradition, “… to be loved like fairies.” [1] His work has contributed to an enduring boom in interest in Japanese folktales. Mizuki, who unlike most prominent revisionists actually experienced the horrors of war firsthand, sees no contradiction between a love for Japan and its traditions, and a willingness to look honestly at the nation’s war history. His war stories contain many shocking images, but he still reflects, “… on the way back to Japan from Rabaul, the moment that I saw Mount Fuji from the sea, I thought, ‘I’m back’, and I felt, ‘I’m Japanese’.” [2]

Mizuki is also one of Japan’s most honored
manga artists. His home town, Sakaiminato in Tottori prefecture, is home to the Mizuki Shigeru Museum (http://www.sakaiminato.net/mizuki/). In addition to the Mizuki Shigeru Road in Sakaiminato – a major tourist spot lined with bronze sculptures of his most famous characters – a Mizuki Shigeru Road was named in Rabaul in 2003.

Mizuki Shigeru Museum

Mizuki is a difficult author to classify ideologically. For example, unlike many other progressives who consider the “Imperial System” to be an invented tradition, Mizuki describes it as central to Japan’s history and culture, “From ancient times ... Japan has had gods like ike no nushi (master of the pond) and mori no nushi (master of the wood) so I think that it is safe to say that the Japanese people like this nushi idea. In a similar way, Japan’s oldest family – the Imperial Family – has watched over the people of Japan with kindness as the kuni no nushi (master of the country) and I don’t think that it is a bad system at all.”[3] He is, however, critical of the Imperial System in wartime, “... the senso-chu no nushi (master in wartime), was terrifying to me.”[4] He contextualizes this with reference to his personal suffering, “When I went to the front lines in the South Pacific, I was beaten half to death for dropping the ‘rifle gifted by his highness’.”[5] Mizuki’s historical perspectives, informed by his own experience of violence and the excesses of Japan’s wartime regime, do not fit comfortably with stereotypical “rightwing” or “leftwing” positions. Sharing elements of both, but with a strong progressive bent in the area of war responsibility, Mizuki has crafted a series of unforgettable war stories.

Mizuki has long played up anti-war themes in his work. In the 1960s, he railed against the American military’s practice of bombing civilian targets in the supernatural series Akuma-kun (Lil’ Devil, 1966-1967), a hit that helped to propel him from artistic journeyman – he got his start painting kami-shibai (‘paper plays’ – alternating pictures narrated by itinerant performers) – to a leader in the industry.[6]

Akuma-kun

Buoyed by this success, he was also one of the handful of creators who experimented with the potential for serious non-fiction manga with Hitler (1971), a critical biography that turns a history of Nazi atrocities into a forceful anti-war parable for Japanese readers.[7] From the 1970s he began to win critical acclaim with a series of autobiographical war stories such as Soin Gyokusai Seyo! (Death to the Last!, 1973), focusing on the abusive treatment of Japanese recruits and the cavalier attitude of their
officers toward human life.[8] He has also consistently put forward positive images of South-Pacific Islanders, contrasting their charity and humanity with the brutality of the Japanese forces.

In the late 1980s, Mizuki’s war manga took a different direction as he attempted to synthesize his own personal experiences with the grand narrative of Japan’s modern history in Showa-shi (History of Showa).[9] This series, despite (or perhaps because of, given a spike of interest in the war period) graphic images of the Nanking Massacre, descriptions of forced labor, and other Japanese war crimes, became a bestseller and was awarded the Kodansha Manga Prize, one of the industry’s highest accolades.[10] A critical view of Japan’s wartime past was no impediment to success. Not only has Mizuki avoided significant criticism by the rightwing, possibly due to his iconic status and personal war experience, but he has also been the recipient of some of the Japanese government’s most prestigious awards - the Shiju Hosho (Purple Ribbon Medal) in 1991 and the Kyokujitsu Sho (Order of the Rising Sun) in 2003.

Below is a translation of Mizuki’s “War and Japan”, a short work in the style of Showa-shi, originally published in 1991 in Shogaku rokunen-sei (Sixth Grader), a leading edutainment magazine for young readers. The difficulty of the material presented raises a number of important issues. Japanese children are not passive receptacles of government-sponsored narratives. The varied perspectives in popular culture are also important. Many of Japan’s most famous manga creators, including Mizuki, Tezuka Osamu, Nakazawa Keiji and Ishinomori Shotaro, have penned honest and challenging war stories. These serve as a powerful counterpoint to revisionist manga like Kobayashi Yoshinori’s Sensoron (On War) that have grabbed attention in the English-speaking world.[11] Several neo-nationalist manga have sold well, but a wide variety of progressive titles have also been successful. Importantly, anti-war themes introduced into the medium by Mizuki and others have helped to shape the trajectory of postwar manga. Explicitly apologist and pro-war titles like Sensoron may be shocking, but their success is dwarfed by that of anti-war visions like Arakawa Hiromu’s current hit Hagane no renkinjutsu-shi (Full Metal Alchemist) which uses a science fiction setting to interrogate organized violence and atrocities.[12]

Order the Japanese original of Mizuki’s war memoir manga Aa Gyokusai here (http://www.amazon.co.jp/%E3%81%82%E3%81%81%E7%8E%89%E7%A0%95%E2%80%95% E6%B0%B4%E6%9C%A8%E3%81%97%E3%81 %92%E3%82%8B%E6%88%A6%E8%A8%98% E9%81%B8%E9%9B%86-%E6%88%A6%E4%BA%89%E3%81%81%E8%E5% B9%B3%E5%92%8C%E3%82%92%E8%80%83 %E3%81%88%E3%82%8B%E3%82%B3%E3%83 %9F%E3%83%83%E3%82%AF-%E6%B0%B4%E6%9C%A8-%E3%81%97%E3%81%92%E3%82%8B/dp/477 6793806/ref=sr_1_24?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid =1222916131&sr=8-24).
Arakawa’s Hagane no renkinjutsu-shi

Specific criticisms of Japan’s wartime order are also prolific as in Senso no shinjitsu (The Truth of War), an August 2008 anthology that uses the visual grammar of shojo (girl’s) manga to look at war from a variety of angles, including atrocities committed by Japanese forces.[13] Mizuki’s “War and Japan”, however, is unique in its simple, accessible diction, and thoughtful, autobiographical conclusion. Describing his motives for turning his war memories into manga, Mizuki writes, “I saw too many comrades die. Even now, I sometimes catch a glimpse of the shades of dead friends standing at my bedside... When I think of those who, now without voice, died pitifully in war, I am overcome with anger.”[14] Mizuki thinks first of the deaths of those close to him, but he never allows this to settle into a simple “Japanese as victims” theme. As “War and Japan” demonstrates, the anger that he feels extends to those responsible for all victims of Japan’s wars.

Notes


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Note - Apart from the title page, this manga should be read (the speech balloons and panels followed) from RIGHT to LEFT.
The narrator of "War and Japan" is Nezumi-Otoko (Mouse Man), a famous character from GeGeGe no Kitaro.

Even in Japan, Life During WWII Wasn't Easy. It was really bad in areas where there wasn't enough food, like Burma and the South Pacific. It was most painful for the parents who sent their precious children off to these battlefields.

In the past, Japanese people learned a lot from China and Korea. After winning the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars, however, they took to the idea that Japan was one of the "Three Great Powers" and started invading other countries for no reason.
KOREA, CHINA and SOUTH-EAST ASIA were all part of the neighborhood.

WHEN THE W.W.II ENDED JAPANESE PEOPLE were surprised at just how much trouble they had been for the neighborhood.

DAMN RIGHT! NETZUMI, OTOKO, you had better get straight, too.

REALLY, WE SHOULD ALL JUST TRY TO GET ALONG.

IT MUST HAVE BEEN SOME TROUBLE FOR PEOPLE WHEN RUGS WAVING JAPANESE SWORDS AROUND COME CHARGING IN...

IT WAS LIKE RAMPAGING AROUND YOUR NEIGHBOR'S HOUSE WITH DIRTY SHOES ON!

PREWAR JAPAN really had no concept of getting along with the neighbors. It was more like: 'I'm strong so I'll just take over.'

IT WAS BASICALLY, 'WE'RE STRONG SO WE CAN BABE IN AND DO WHATEVER WE WANT.'

AND WE CALLED KOREAN PEOPLE "SLOPES".

BACK THEN WE CALLED CHINESE PEOPLE "CHINKS".
... "MORAL
EDUCATION"... WAS DOMINATED
BY THE "EMPEROR'S
EDUCATION" AND ALSO
BY:

EDUCATION AT THE
TIME...

WE INSULTED
THEM!

FROM THE TIME
THEY WERE
CHILDREN...

THEM...

MILITARY SPIRIT
POUNDED
INTO THEM.

HAD... "SPIRIT
SERMONS..."

"THE OLDER ONES..."

"IT'S BECAUSE
OF THE SOLDIERS
THAT WE ARE
HERE TO GO TO
SCHOOL TODAY..."

"THEM..."

... THEY WERE
MADE TO
SING...

... ARE
WORMS!

DIRT!

ARE
HUMAN
EVERYONE
ELSE...

PEOPLE
WITH
"JAPANESE
SPIRIT..."

WHEN YOU DIE,
GO HOME AND
GROW LIKE THE
CHERRY
BLOSSOM...

IDIOOT!

DO YOU UNDERSTAND
THE BLOOD
NOMAGA FORM... WHAT IS THE SOUL
OF JAPAN. IF NOT THE SOUL OF
CHERRY
BLOSSOMS AS THE SUN RISING?"

NOW
CHARGE!

YES, SIR!

SIR!

WHA?!

DON'T GET IT...

GOOD CITIZENS THROW AWAY
THEIR LIVES LIGHTLY FOR
THE EMPEROR!
... it was a time when life was taken lightly.

For this reason or that...

Bastard, you're Eugene.

It was considered no big thing to kill someone who was not a member of the 'Yamato race'.

5 or 6 of 'em!

Just now. I tested my new sword on...

... and when they died, a mass grave called. They worked...

What's this guy's problem?

Haw, ha, ha, ha.

Ha, ha, ha, just now I set a new record at 100!

Stuff like this was all over the papers.

I'm up to 110!

Anyway, it was a time when life was taken lightly.

Japan set up Manchuria there. Especially when China's north-east region was taken over.

Anyway, it was a time when life was taken lightly.

The Manchou people were worked like slaves.

Manchou! (Ten thousand and all it) was used to dispose of the bodies.
The Nanjing massacre took place when Japan took over Nanjing in 1937. Ordinary Japanese only heard about this during the postwar Tokyo trials.

One of thousands of civilians were among soldiers of the "Chinese resistance" and killed.
If soldiers are killed on the battlefield, it can't be helped, but... What about...

It was the Chinese community that protested against this.

On top of that, it was against the rules for Japanese soldiers to be taken captive.

It is just terrible when lots of unarmed people are killed after the fight is over.

They say 'don't live and suffer the indignity of becoming a prisoner!'

Must be obeyed!

You lost! These are the military regulations that... 

...and Japanese soldiers were harmed.

Because of this attitude... That's why we're strong!

They suffered the indignity of becoming a prisoner, didn't they?

Well, some Americans told us this, but after the war, he was captured by the Americans.

This is an iron rule! You must obey!

In any case, for young Japanese it became like, 'Anyone who isn't Japanese just isn't human.'

Japanese would rather die than be taken prisoner!

Japan won't sign!

It said that both sides in a conflict should not harm prisoners.

You 'suffered that indignity,' right?
During the Second World War all sorts of bad things like HUNGER, FEVER, AND MALARIA befell me in the South Pacific.
AT THE TIME THE LOCAL PEOPLE WERE SO FRIENDLY

I GUESS THIS IS JUST ABOUT IT FOR ME...

I HAVEN'T BEEN ABLE TO EAT A THING FOR TEN DAYS!

IT'S GREAT!

HERE'S A POTATO.

I THINK I CAN GET THIS DOWN.

HEY JAPANESE! EAT THIS FRUIT!

I COULD EAT ALL THE POTATOES I WANT.

I WISH THAT I HAD A POTATO PATCH.

HE SURE CAN EAT!

YOU MAKE A POTATO PATCH FOR YOU.

I'M SO HAPPY!

YEAH! MY OWN POTATO PATCH!

HEY, WE MADE A POTATO PATCH FOR YOU.

3 OR 4 DAYS LATER...

I WAS SURPRISED, AT A LOSS FOR WORDS.

THE THIRD CHEF...

I STILL GO TO SEE THEM FROM TIME TO TIME.

IT'S BEEN 40 YEARS...

THEY REALLY DID SAVE ME.

OUR CHIEF WAS KILLED BY THE JAPANESE ARMY...

PEOPLE GET DEPRESSED.

BUT WHEN THE CONVERSATION TURNS TO WAR...

THE THIRD CHEF WAS ALSO KILLED.

THE NEXT CHEF WAS KILLED too.

THE EYES OF THE PEOPLE TOOK ON A SHADE THAT I HAD NEVER SEEN BEFORE...

I WAS SURPRISED...

THE THIRD CHEF...

... WAS MY UNCLE.
DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT!

THEN... TORTOTh AND HIS FRIENDS DISCUSS.

THINGS TURNED DARK FOR A MOMENT...

...JUST BECAUSE THE CHIEF WAS UNCOOPERATIVE, THEY CUT OFF HIS HEAD.

...I JUST WANTED TO "HELP" THEM.

HE SAID.

...THE JAPANESE... THEY...

YOU'RE DIFFERENT, HA HA!

OH MY...

THEY WOULDN'T FORGET.

THIS STAYS IN THE
HEARTS OF VICTIMS.
FOREVER.

...WERE STILL SO KIND.

I DIDN'T KNOW.

THREE CHIEFS WERE KILLED...

I BOUGHT A USED TRUCK FOR THEM. BUT THERE'S NO WAY THIS WILL MAKE WAR GO Away...

I THINK THAT THEY HAVE SUCH HUMANITY, SUCH RICH HEARTS.

I REFLECTED HONESTLY ON THAT...

THE SLAUGHTER OF OVER 100,000.
IN CHINA.

THE INHUMAN BEHAVIOR
OF JAPAN DURING THE RULE OF KOREA.

...EVEN THE GODS SHOULDN'T TRY TO TAKE THIS
AWAY.

ALL PEOPLE JUST WANT TO LIVE IN HAPPINESS...

...IS WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A JAPANESE WHO CAN STAND TALL.