

## BOOK REVIEWS

### **Uneasy Warriors: Gender, Memory, and Popular Culture in the Japanese Army**

Sabine Frühstück,

Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2007, 270 pp.

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This monograph examines the socio-cultural realm of the Japan Self-Defence Forces (JSDF) charting the contradictions and uneasiness of the modern military profession within the country. Across five chapters, Sabine Frühstück provocatively points out how in many ways the JSDF prefigured the ‘post-modern’ character of present military organizations through their practice of ‘carefully constraining and recasting their potential for violent acts in the name of the Japanese state’ (p. 7). In post-war Japan, normative constraints enshrined in Article 9 of the constitution, memories of the violent behavior of the imperial armed forces, post-war popular culture, and social models, have in fact contributed to make the transition towards ‘new modes of militarized gender’ a permanent factor shaping the JSDF’s identity.

Her research stands on solid ground. The book draws upon sources encompassing publications and visual materials from the Japan Defence Agency (JDA) (as of January 2007, Japan Ministry of Defence (JMoD))

and the JSDF, numerous interviews with uniformed personnel, visits to bases and a short training experience with the Japan Ground Self-Defence Force (JGSDF). A detailed analysis of the latter is presented in the first chapter, whilst descriptions of ceremonies and daily routines fill the pages of the text with the effect of taking the reader to the heart of inner-service daily dynamics. In this respect, this monograph makes an important contribution to the study of the JSDF. It shows the merits of employing research techniques from different academic disciplines to construct a vivid portrayal of the personal and professional ambitions, anxieties, and rewards of the members a largely unknown reality of contemporary Japan.

A gender studies agenda permeates the fabric of the book and oversees the way this body of evidence is processed. This has enabled the author to explain the contradictory relationship between the JSDF's quest for public legitimization of its military functions and the necessity to 'civilianize' its outlook to narrow the gap with the Japanese society in a thought-provoking fashion. The author argues that internally the JSDF had to constantly negotiate the construction of its 'military masculinities' by projecting a 'multifaceted, unstable, and amorphous' gender mode (p. 54). For service members, the post-war civilian model of the Japanese white-collar employee is regarded as a reference parameter in terms of spirit of commitment, the modern archetype of 'corporate warrior' (p. 56). Similarly, in the book the reader learns that the American soldier has replaced the more controversial Imperial Japanese Army officer as the quintessential ideal for the professional connotations pertinent to the sphere of combat.

Like their male counterparts, female personnel too live in a state of tension. In their case, this unfolds from the contrast between the JSDF's public self-representation, that makes extensive use of female images to downplay its war potential character, and inner gender politics, which tend to marginalize women in the attempt to protect their 'special physical' needs (p. 101). Other sources of tension in their identity pertain to the differences between personal ambitions and family expectations, the willingness to downplay womanhood to be integrated into the military and the focus of popular media on the womanly charm of female soldiers. The book concludes that this contradictory militarized masculinity defines the self-perception of both service men and women. Both are 'determined, individualistic, and conscious of

their professional and gender identities as fluid, unstable, and malleable' (p. 115).

By the same token, in recruitment posters, informational pamphlets, and promotional pictorial books, the nature of the profession is emasculated of its martial component, replaced by a non-violent symbolism and 'cute' attractive cartoon characters like the JSDF's mascot *Prince Pickles*. Attributes of military prowess and emblems of masculinity such as mortars, tanks, aircraft are part of daily life for the Japanese soldier, but they are exhibited with extreme caution as displays of firepower could mistakenly evoke blasphemous images of militarism. Violence is highly ritualized and presented as a fictional performance in the confined spaces of public parades and live fire exercises. These conclusions are further reinforced by the examination of the JSDF's *lieux de mémoire*. The pedagogy emerging from expository places like base museums is one where the aggressive behavior embedded with the memories of the imperial armed forces is 'redressed, reinterpreted, reorganized, and repopulated'. Similarly, organizational history is an ersatz product negotiated more to satisfy the interests of local communities 'rather than being bound by some sort of objective or academic historiography' (p. 154).

Whilst the narrative is engaging, the author's gender-oriented agenda severely limits the yield of the materials at her disposal in two ways. Firstly, by focusing on the militarized masculinities of single service members the book offers little real indication on how 'the Japanese army' as an organization is addressing the core questions related to its roles, self-perception, and public image. In a military organization, professional socialization and self-perceptions vary within different ranks, as soldiers and officers are meant to perform different duties determined by the organization's governing authorities. In the book, the relationship linking individuals and organization, central to the construction of the identity of any armed force, is a missing piece. The book makes generalization about 'the army', but there is no attempt to assess the individual impressions against 'official doctrines' and personal stories speak for the entire establishment.

In one clear example of the limitations of such an approach, the author reproduces the text of a promotional video clip by the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF) (p. 121) to emphasize the point of the ambiguity of the image advertised, failing to specify that the video is part of a set of three clips. Each of these videos employs specific

techniques of mass communication to pinpoint attributes that can more easily reconcile the identity of the naval service with the interests of a junior high school child, a potential recruit with a high school background, or a university undergraduate student. Together, these videos suggest the existence of a clear service promotional strategy, but one that does not necessarily aim at 'emasculating its military function'. Yet, in the text, this aspect is not addressed and as a result, the reader is left with a strong impression that evidence is conveniently selected to play to the argument's strengths.

Secondly, by imposing categories from theories on gender and the military, the book does not allow the reader to factor in the specificities of the Japanese historical and military experience. In Japan, different memories and perceptions exist of the behavior and performance of the imperial army and navy. For these reasons, the JGSDF and JMSDF entertain very different relationships with their respective pre-war ancestors, a fact that is briefly mentioned by one of the interviewees (p. 44). Nonetheless, in dealing with the crucial theme of the memorialization of the past the author does not cover this ground at all. For example, descriptions of base museums provided in chapter five substantially differ from exhibitions in JMSDF's museums in Sasebo, Kanoya, and Kure. The importance of services' sub-cultures in the construction and negotiation of the identity of the contemporary Japanese military is another crucial missing piece. In the book, the JSDF are presented as one homogeneous body but it is questionable whether the author's conclusions on the organization's contradictory identity can be applicable beyond the realm of the JGSDF (most of the fieldwork was conducted at JGSDF bases).

Notwithstanding merits pertaining to the research technique and the originality of the subject investigated, this book leaves something to be desired. The basic argument that memory, gender, and popular culture make the Japanese army an establishment with an amorphous identity, downplaying its military character one day and doing the opposite another, adds little to stereotyped ideas of the JSDF being either a harmless collection of men and kits, or a suspicious group of gung-ho militarists who are secretly waiting to revive the glory days of imperial Japan. Modern soldiers perform their duties in a world that is increasingly complex and as the book correctly points out the Japanese are no exception to the rule. Yet, the book fails to investigate this issue beyond

the level of single stories and, by the end, the reader feels ‘uneasy’ about it, just like Japanese service members are said to feel about their profession.

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**Normalizing Japan: Politics, Identity,  
and the Evolution of Security Practice**

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Scholars of international relations (IR) generally agree that at present Japan is not sufficiently ‘normal’ in its national security principles and behavior, as symbolized by the nation’s ‘peace constitution’ and the restraints imposed on national power projections. Scholarly experts offer, however, dichotomous views on Japan’s future trajectory. ‘Realists’ emphasizing materialistic power distribution in international politics assert that Japan is already close to discarding its post World War II pacifist identity in order to become a muscle-flexing military giant more commensurate with its international status and changing external environment. ‘Constructivists’ focusing on the resilience of social identity, on the other hand, counter that despite drastic shifts in international power dynamics, Japan is likely to maintain the core of its antimilitaristic