

Frühstück, Sabine: *Playing War. Children and the Paradoxes of Modern Militarism in Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press 2017. ISBN: 978-0520295452; 288 S.

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In „Playing War: Children and the Paradoxes of Modern Militarism in Japan“, Sabine Frühstück examines ways that both the image of children and the concept of childhood have been appropriated in order to moralize war and sentimentalize peace. Frühstück draws attention to the troubling alliance that has been forged between children and war from the late nineteenth century to the present through a close examination of a wide array of case studies, from children's activities such as outdoor games and board games, songs, classroom lessons, and physical education classes, to how children have been visually depicted in print publications. Drawing on Cynthia Enloe's idea of „maneuvering,“ i.e. the militarization of society (and women in the case of Enloe's work), Frühstück reveals how children's lives have been militarized and how children have been used to militarize society throughout modern Japan.¹ The assumed qualities of children, such as vulnerability and innocence, have been employed to convey particular kinds of messages concerning warfare during Imperial Japan (1868–1945) and of peace, especially in the recent decades during which the Japanese Self Defense Forces have come under scrutiny.

The book is organized into two parts „Playing War“ and „Visualizing War.“ Children's war games had existed before modern Japan. But the popularity of war games and the intensity with which children engaged in them (injuries and even deaths have been reported) surged along with the escalation of Japan's militarism. „Playing war“ did not take place only on the playgrounds and in the fields. Both elementary and secondary schools followed the army infantry manual in setting up their physical education programs. The objective was twofold: to improve the children's physical stature and to instill discipline into their young minds. In the classrooms, children learned of courageous acts by Japanese

soldiers on the battlefield and became accustomed to weapons of war through textbooks that featured them. A new school subject called „spiritual education“ forged a connection between „male maturity and military service, and boys' war play with men making war.“ (p. 31)

War also permeated children's everyday life, in popular culture and as toys and board games. Especially during the Asia-Pacific War (1931–45), as Japanese troops advanced into China and Southeast Asia, educators sought for ways to familiarize children with Japan's military endeavors. For example, *Sugoroku* (a luck-of-the-dice board game akin to Snakes and Ladders) proved especially useful in the instruction of the young, including preliterate children. By progressing through Japan's actual battlefields mapped on the board, children learned geography lessons of Japan's expanding empire through play. Such acts of play normalized war in children's lives. Joy of winning the game was conflated with victory on the battlefield.

Images of children proliferated in war-related visual material produced in wartime Japan. According to Frühstück, children embodied an „emotional capital,“ defined as „emotions attributed to children and emotions that adults are expected to have in response to children and representations of the child.“ (p. 114) Through this quality, children came to be emotionally attributed with innocence, purity, and authenticity. „Emotional capital“ worked especially well in images where children were juxtaposed with soldiers. The pairing was to simultaneously justify war (soldiers are protecting innocent children) and create a natural continuity between the child and the soldier (children will grow up to be soldiers).

If the use of images of children during wartime appear problematic, even more troubling is their use in the public relations material produced by and for the Japanese Self Defense Forces (SDF) in the recent years. The promotion of the armed forces in a country that has constitutionally renounced war as its sovereign right is a complicated matter. The SDF have thus avoided the mention of war

¹ Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers. The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives*, Berkeley 2000.

and emphasized peacekeeping and humanitarian issues. The use of children's images seems to be a natural solution to this problem. PR material have thus featured manga and anime depictions of animals and children. But the trend in recent PR material is shocking. Featured are prepubescent girls who are intensely sexualized, in scant uniforms and carrying weapons of war.

In this vexing trend, Frühstück identifies feedback loops among three styles of publications: „formal and official military PR materials; other publications that straddle the military and the popular realms and which are often partly or fully funded by organizations associated with the SDF; and a segment of popular culture that is heavily infused with the soft-pornification of preteen girls.“ (p. 180) To me, this blurring of boundaries between the SDF and a subset of popular culture raises the question of audience. Who are the SDF trying to appeal to? Men and women who enroll in the SDF tend to be from the same demographic as those who enroll in the military elsewhere. Are we to assume that those in the poorest segment of the Japanese society tend to be avid fans of this type of popular culture? Or is this an attempt by the SDF to expand their clientele?

One notable absence from „Playing War“ is a discussion of gender. With the exception of the final chapter on the SDF, girls are mostly absent. „Children“ typically seems to refer to boys, whereas girls are specified as girls. The war games, for the most part, groomed boys into soldiers. The assumption of wartime Japan was that girls were to become mothers, to produce boys and support them so that they could become soldiers. This idea is difficult to transform into play. A girl's version of the *sugoroku* game offers a trajectory of a homefront life, paying respect to the flag, packing comfort bags, and visiting a military hospital (pp. 66–67). But after they send the soldiers off to the front, the girls too embark on a journey through the battlefield on a quest to reach the final frame in which male Japanese soldiers laugh with Chinese children holding Japanese flags. Were the girls assumed to take on the soldier role in the latter half of this game? How did „playing war“ prepare girls for actual wars?

Similarly, the gender analysis could be pushed further, for example, in the SDF promotional material in which over-sexualized girls wear military uniforms. Here, the girls are at once a member of the SDF and a commodity designed to make the organization more desirable for men. Frühstück notes that the SDF appear to be „queering war“ by „blurring, and redefining the boundaries of war/peace, man/woman, child/cyborg, and sex/violence.“ (p. 169) Rather than blurring the lines between man and woman, the promotional material seems to be pushing the distinction further by transforming girls into objects of desire.

„Playing War“ is the first book in a non-Japanese language that directly address issues related to children and war in modern Japan. It is an important contribution to our understanding of the culture of warfare in modern Japan that culminated in inordinate amount of deaths on both sides of the Pacific. The analysis of the recent PR efforts by the SDF introduces us to a troubling dimension of Japan's armed forces. The rich analysis is aided by a large number of often startling images depicting various aspects that tie children with war. Total war cannot be waged without the full support of the society. „Playing War“ convincingly demonstrates how Japanese children's lives were militarized, as well as how their images were utilized to militarize Japanese society.

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