

Kamikaze, Cherry Blossom, and Nationalism

Review >
Japan

Human self-sacrifice, such as that of Allied soldiers in Iraq and Palestinian suicide bombers, obtains a new dimension in Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney's theme of patriotic suicide as an aesthetic ideal. Her study of the role of symbolism and aesthetics in totalitarian ideology shows how the state manipulated the symbol of the cherry blossom, a Japanese ideal of evanescent beauty. To persuade people that it was their honour to 'die like beautiful falling cherry petals' for the emperor, soldiers were promised that their souls would be honoured in eternity in the, now, politically controversial Yasukuni Shrine.

By Margaret Sleeboom

Drawing on diaries, unpublished in English, Ohnuki-Tierney provides a lucid discussion of the views and motives of the kamikaze pilots (*tokkotai*, or 'special attack corps'). She presents them as idealist romantics who sacrificed their confused lives for the country they held dear. Ohnuki-Tierney describes their patriotism convincingly as a product of a complex interpenetration between global intellectual tides, political and military threats from the West, and their own Japanese intellectual traditions, which were themselves also the products of interactions between the local and the global (p. 240).

The book is divided into four parts. Part one focuses on the meaning and symbolism of the cherry blossom, part two on the militarization of the masses since the nineteenth century up to World War Two, and part three on the way in which young men 'volunteered' to 'defend their country against American invasion'. Part four examines how the state managed to change the conceptions of emperor and cherry blossom, the latter being a Japanese master trope of imperial nationalism at the beginning of the Meiji period. Ohnuki-Tierney locates the power of (national) symbols and rituals in *méconnaissance*, a term borrowed from Jacques Lacan, referring to the communication absence occurring when people do not share a meaning but derive different meanings from the same symbols and rituals.

The author explores how state nationalism is developed and how it succeeds and/or fails to be accepted by 'ordinary' individuals, who, rather often, embrace as 'natural' basic changes in culture and society initiated by political, military, and intellectual leaders. The student pilots all had their own ideas and ideals. Among them were members of Japan's Romantic Movement and of Cogito, a platform that became closely tied with ultranationalism, Marxists, utopian humanitarians, and Christians. Distinguishing between the patriotism of *pro patria mori*, which was espoused by individual pilots, and state nationalism, which was fostered from above, promoting *pro rege et patria mori* (to die for emperor and country) (p.7), Ohnuki-Tierney argues that, though each of the five discussed pilots reproduced the latter ideology in action, none of them reproduced it *in toto* in thought.

Japanese cherry blossom and the West

One aim of the book is to examine the power of aesthetics for political purposes, using the state's manipulation of cherry blossom symbolism as a case. According to Ohnuki-Tierney notions of the state and various ideologies, which motivated *tokkotai* to fly for their country, were both imported from the West. Thus, the pilots were tricked by the state into sacrificing their lives: 'When the "general will", transformed by the Nazi and Japanese states, was

seen as the general will of Rousseau and Kant, they were disarmed and did not suspect the wicked hand of manipulation' (p.17). The soldiers also borrowed Christianity from Europe to provide them with a model of sacrifice for others and the notion of life after death. The only model of sacrifice in Japan drew on the Confucian notion of loyalty to one's parents and lord (p.18–19). State manipulation of the young intellectual *tokkotai* imposed Western concepts of the nation and modernity on Japanese culture: thus, Western philosophies and ideologies explain and carry the main responsibility for their behaviour.

The sharp distinctions between state and country, nationalism and patriotism, and official kill and romantic self-sacrifice, make Japanese patriotic *tokkotai* victims of the West. Indeed the Western state, Western concepts of nationalism, Western ideologies and philosophies during, and Western censorship and prejudices after, the Pacific War, seem to have rather too much to answer for. It seems the book lacks data on *tokkotai* attitudes toward Asia, on the views of non-intellectual *tokkotai* about 'sacrificing' their lives, on the conditions under which the diaries were written, and on the intellectuals responsible for state policies. Thus, in describing the minds of the student-pilots, Ohnuki-Tierney argues that the Japanese philosopher Tanabe Hajime (a devout Christian) was influential, and most extensively read. But she does

not refer to his *Logic of Species*, which is still cursed today by Chinese intellectuals as a racist basis for Japanese imperialism (Bian Chongdao 1989:8). Neither does she refer to the role of the extreme right, which, in the 1980s and 1990s, converted former *tokkotai* bases on the southern island of Kyuushu (Chiran and Bansei) into popular tourist spots. Furthermore, the Yasukuni Shrine is presented as the resting-place of the souls of the *tokkotai*, separate from the neighbouring souls of

class-A war criminals, still celebrated by the far right. Moreover, no mention is made of the post-war role of 'victim consciousness' of pacifist national identity in Japan (Orr 2001).

Ulterior motives

The *tokkotai* diaries have been much discussed in Japan of the 1990s, but only sporadically in English (cf. Sasaki 1997). Though it aims to alter the current image of kamikaze, it does so by focusing on the intellectual elite who represent only one-sixth of all Okinawa *tokkotai* (Sasaki 1997:15). Furthermore, Ohnuki-Tierney ascribes the truly amazing number of lengthy diaries left by *tokkotai* pilots to the importance of 'writing' as a mode of communication in Japanese culture (p.189), not to their academic background. More seriously, the behaviour of the romantic pilots remains mysterious due to a lack of contextual analysis. The meaning of 'voluntary' recruitment, the influence of state and self-censorship, social pressure, state propaganda, and education are insufficiently linked to the reading of the diaries. Finally, I doubt whether Ohnuki-Tierney has done the image of the kamikaze any favours. Whereas we may sympathize with soldiers following state orders to fight a war they believe to be unjust, the soldiers here



Plate 6, taken from the book under review.

Umezawa Kazuyo, *tokkotai* pilot, with branches of cherry blossoms on his uniform. Courtesy of his brother, Dr Umezawa Shōzō.

described, who believe their war to be justified for reasons (rooted in religious, philosophical, and utopian ideologies) at variance with those of the state, are not likely to receive any sympathy. <

- Ohnuki-Tierney, Emiko, *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms. The Militarization of Aesthetics in Japanese History*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press (2002), pp. xvii + 411, ISBN 0-226-62091-3

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