



Welcome to the April issue of *The Japan Society Review*! We are very pleased to present reviews of four books and one Netflix series showcasing different aspects and stories from and about Japan.

The first review of this issue focuses on a book exploring the renowned Shikoku pilgrimage, a Buddhist pilgrimage route taking in 88 temples around the Shikoku Island. In *The Shikoku Pilgrimage: Japan's Sacred Trail*, author John Lander offers an interesting introduction to the temples' architecture as well as their gardens, scenery and atmosphere, plus a visually attractive selection of photographs.

Sticking with non-fiction, our second review covers the publication *Japan from Anime to Zen*, a quick guide to different aspects of Japanese culture from food and drink to traditional arts, history and social customs. Written by Berlin-based freelance journalist David Watts Barton, the book presents a vast selection of over eighty-five individual topics relating to Japan including some charming illustrations too.

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We then turn to Japanese literature, represented by a novel and a short story collection, both written by female authors. *Woman Running in the Mountains* is the latest work translated into English by celebrated writer Tsushima Yuko. As with her previous volume *Territory of Light*, the novel centres on the topic of maternity and motherhood, focusing in particular on the challenges and experiences of a single mother in 1980s Japan. In contrast, *Terminal Boredom* brings English-speaking readers the quirky science fiction work of Suzuki Izumi, a cult author of distinctly bizarre tales touching upon issues of gender, sex and drug use from new, compelling angles.

The review of *Age of Samurai: Battle for Japan* closes this issue of *The Japan Society Review*, offering an examination of this six-part Netflix documentary series on the reunification of Japan and the historical figures of Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

## Editor

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## Reviewers

Jess Cope, Laurence Green, and Riyoko Shibe.

Image: cover from *The Shikoku Pilgrimage: Japan's Sacred Trail*.



## The Shikoku Pilgrimage: Japan's Sacred Trail

by John Lander

River Books (2021)  
ISBN-13: 978-6164510517

Review by Jess Cope



For most pilgrims on the 1142km Shikoku pilgrimage, a journey taking in 88 temples around the Shikoku Island, the smallest of Japan's four main islands, the 12<sup>th</sup> temple, Shosan-ji, is the first nansho – dangerous and hard to reach place – that they will encounter. Accessible by car via a road that gently winds up the Akui river valley, there is a hair-raisingly narrow final ascent that climbs in short order from 200m up to the temple's location some 700 meters up in the mountains. Those attempting the pilgrimage on foot generally opt for a more direct route, albeit one that takes them over three mountain ridges, requiring almost 1400 meters of cumulative ascent and 700 meters of descent to reach the temple. All pilgrims will thus likely be relieved to finally reach the temple's impressive ancient wooden sanmon (front gate), behind which immense Japanese cedars rise from the white gravel of its compound, the wooded slopes of the mountain falling away in the near-distance. The kanji characters for "Shosan-ji" - 「焼山寺」 - mean "Burning Mountain Temple", hinting at the 1,200 year old legend associated with the temple, in which a young monk sealed away a fire-breathing dragon who had terrorised local villagers and set the mountain ablaze. The monk was Kobo Daishi (774-825), also known as Kukai, who would go on to found Shingon Buddhism and whose journey around Shikoku conducting ascetic training in the 9<sup>th</sup> century has been traced by innumerable pilgrims over the centuries since.

The legend, one of many associated with Kobo Daishi, is outlined alongside a gorgeous photo of Shosan-ji's *sanmon* (p. 63) in John Lander's new book *The Shikoku Pilgrimage: Japan's Sacred Trail*. The book opens with a short background on some of the key elements making up the pilgrimage, including basic temple protocol, the traditional pilgrimage clothing, and a potted history of Kobo Daishi himself. It also covers the unique cultural practice in Shikoku of *o-settai* (p. 15), whereby local people give gifts to pilgrims (known as *henro* or with the honorific *ohenro*) as a means of vicarious participation in the pilgrimage. But the main focus of the book is very much on the 88 temples, each of which is featured with a short paragraph discussing

its history, legend and characteristics alongside 1-3 beautifully shot photographs.

The subject matter lends itself well to a photographic examination. The temples provide a stunning selection of ancient compounds, historic architecture, imposing Buddhist statuary, unusual gardens, and breath-taking backdrops. The book's sections align with the pilgrimage's four *dojo* (stages of ascetic training) that follow the boundaries of Shikoku's four prefectures, and a brief introduction to the prefectures themselves leads each section. The curious reader will undoubtedly appreciate getting to know more about a frequently overlooked corner of Japan with fascinating destinations far from the well-trod tourist trails.

To those who have never heard of, much less contemplated undertaking, the Shikoku pilgrimage, Lander's book serves as a lovely introduction. Anyone moved to visit Shikoku as a result will also find it a helpful companion, with Lander pointing out features that can be surprisingly easy to overlook. The beautiful, sculpted garden hidden behind the main hall of Temple 68, Jinne-in (p. 192), will have been missed by a great many pilgrims even over repeated visits. Similarly, the only reason that this reviewer was familiar with the stone garden at Temple 86, Shido-ji – originally designed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century to evoke ink wash paintings of Chinese landscapes (pp. 223-225) – was because of a chance tip-off from a gardener in the main grounds. Such guidance can elevate the experience, as many of the temples have unique features or customs associated with them (such as laying coins on each of the stairs of Temple 23, Yakuo-ji, p. 84) the significance of which is easy for visitors to miss.

That said, this is not a guidebook and should not be treated as such. Lander's objective seems to be to create a visually attractive overall impression of the temples, rather than necessarily to fully capture the unique charms of each one. In this respect it is extremely successful – the book is beautifully presented, with a wonderful and diverse selection of photographs of temple architecture, gardens, scenery, ornamentation and statuary. The cumulative effect provides a balance of overview and detail to give a reasonable impression of the sights a pilgrim will encounter in the temples. Many of the gorgeous pictures perfectly capture the atmosphere of the featured temple. The uneven stony compound of Temple 14, Joraku-ji (p. 67), is instantly recognisable, as are the faded colours of the hangings adorning the threadbare Temple 22, Byodo-ji (p. 80-81).

The beautiful temple wings adjoining the courtyard of Temple 64, Maegami-ji (p. 181), are well-shown.

Some temples do feel short-changed, however. Temple 49, Jodo-ji (p. 156), is represented only by a photo of two fairly unremarkable statues. There are no photos at all of the modern redesign of Temple 61, Kouon-ji (p. 178), whose altars are encased high within a jarring but remarkable piece of 1970s Buddhism-meets-Brutalism architecture. Readers familiar with the temples may therefore disagree with some editorial decisions about which photos to showcase, something which Lander himself recognises as a possibility in the introduction to the book.

But such decisions must have been extremely difficult: after all, to truly capture some of these stunning temples in full one would need to show the approach and the temple's profile from afar, its monumental *sanmon*, its compound (with details of its key monuments, treasures, statuary, and garden features), its halls of worship (both inside and out), and its views. With 88 temples to cover, a book that attempted to do this for each would be impractically immense and near unreadable. With such a wealth of options to choose from, it is unsurprising that even where attractive and representative photos have been chosen, some other temple highlights have unavoidably been left on the cutting room floor.

Of course, there is more to the pilgrimage than the temples. Despite the cover featuring a traditionally dressed pilgrim, the book does not focus on the *henro* pilgrims themselves. Though some brief *henro* profiles help break up the book in the middle, *henro* are conspicuously absent from most of the photographs of temples. This is quite a departure from the experience of visiting Shikoku, where the *henro* are everywhere in their distinctive white garb – walking along the roadside, spilling off coaches in temple parking lots, lighting incense and candles, and chanting the sutras in front of the temple halls.

The journey that ties the 88 temples together into a pilgrimage is also hard to discern. Many of the

temples on the pilgrimage were established during the Heian period (794-1185), when the trend of *sangaku* Buddhism took hold and there was an emphasis on establishing temples in remote and hard to reach places as a means of ascetic practice to cultivate almost “magical” powers (the myths and legends attached to many of the temples no doubt also reflect this trend). The pilgrimage is therefore mountainous as well as lengthy - by some calculations it features almost 25,000 meters of cumulative climbing (and thus descending) when completed on foot. As a result, pilgrims traverse a range of spectacular landscapes: the densely forested paths up to many a mountain temple, the dramatic road sandwiched between the cliffs and the pounding Pacific Ocean leading to the very tip of Cape Muroto, the charming narrow country lanes leading to the tip of Cape Ashizuri, the two temples on twin mountainous peninsulas jutting into the Inland Sea to the northeast of Takamatsu. Such sights, intrinsic to the pilgrimage, do not come through in the book.

Again, these omissions are likely deliberate, or at least conscious: the pilgrimage is too immense for a comprehensive record to be practical, and the book's editorial focus yields its own rewards. Furthermore, such a wide range of photos would likely overwhelm many readers, and as a result the disciplined focus of the book is eminently accessible, with no prior interest in the pilgrimage, Buddhism or even Japan required to enjoy what it has to offer.

In the introduction to the book, Lander states that the photos were taken through repeated visits to Shikoku over many years. Some of the more idiosyncratic photo choices reflect that the book is a labour of love, and Lander's affection for Shikoku and its pilgrimage shines through. The only real way to experience the pilgrimage in its entirety is, of course, to complete it in person. To the extent that Lander's beautiful passion project inspires more people to do just that, it will have been a success. §

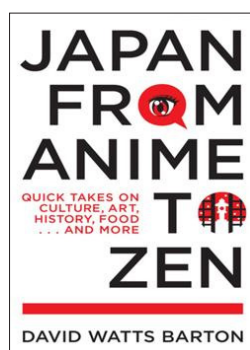
## Japan from Anime to Zen: Quick takes on Culture, Art, History, Food...And More

by David Watts Barton

Stone Bridge Press (2021)

ISBN-13: 978-1611720631

Review by Laurence Green



Everyone understands that Japan is an important country. But it is useful to remember why. For despite its modest size, Japan consistently punches above its weight.

This, in essence, is the question at hand in *Japan from Anime to Zen: Quick takes on Culture, Art, History, Food... And More*, the latest in a long line of guidebooks and

travelogues that attempt to answer that eternal 'why?' we have all posed at one point or other when considering what exactly it is that fascinates us so much about Japan. In the hands of Berlin-based freelance journalist David Watts Barton, who is capably assisted here with some rather charming illustrations from Yuko Nagasaki, we journey through a vast selection of over eighty-five individual topics relating to Japan, each often lasting only a handful of pages. The book is divided into five core sections, each encompassing broad themes ranging from 'Food and Drink' through to 'Traditional Arts and Culture' - within these wider categories however, the contents are often more loosely arranged. A segment on *Ikebana* (flower arranging), feels like a natural companion to the part on bonsai trees that follows it, whereas elsewhere, the jumps between segments can feel a little more at odds: a discussion on the aftermath of the 2011 Fukushima disaster follows directly on from a segment on *hentai* (erotic media) and 'Other Sexual Oddities'.

All told, this very much contributes to a sense that this book is designed to be seen as something to be dipped into and savoured as small, bite-size morsels. While there certainly are broader narrative strokes to be had here - charting the course of Japan as a nation from historical times through to the present day, for example - its emphasis on 'quick takes' very much positions the book as the (hopefully) satisfactory answer to those elusive questions on the tip of your tongue.

To those looking to take their first trip to Japan, or maybe left pondering many of the nuances of the nation's culture on their return, the sheer expansiveness in scope of the book makes it an ideal travel companion. Conversely, to longtime Japan watchers, much of the contents will no doubt already be familiar, and some chapters will naturally offer more value than others. An early section on condiments such as *shoyu* (soy sauce) and *nori* (seaweed), for example, is largely just a recap of details you could find in any Japanese cookbook or after a cursory look online. For those readers with a strong foundation already in much of the everyday paraphernalia of Japan, the real value is to be found elsewhere, and Barton's journalistic eye for detail serves up some fascinating (and genuinely revelatory) sections on topics such as Japan's equivalent to the farm-to-fork movement, as well as a run down of the essential ingredients that make up a Japanese wedding (eg. guests usually pay a fee in the form of 'gift money' to the newlyweds in order to attend - sometimes as much as ¥30,000, about £300).

Other standout sections include a timely look at womanhood in Japan, which unpacks the context of

the *yamato nadeshiko* (the personification of the ideal woman), explaining how the symbolism of the *nadeshiko* - literally a carnation flower - can also be taken in the context of the kanji's reading as 'caressable child'. As the book goes on to explain, being a woman in Japan often 'still boils down to being pretty, well mannered, good at taking care of others, being not-too-smart (though a little sassy is cute), and above all, generally pleasing to men'.

Elsewhere, there is a fascinating look at how art transformed the small island of Naoshima - only eight square kilometres in size, and located between mainland Honshu and southern Shikoku - via transformative input from big name Japanese talent such as architect Tadao Ando as well as Yayoi Kusama, whose famed giant polka-dot pumpkins have very much become the island's mascots. Follow-up sections on Japanese architecture as a whole and the history of the ultra-compact capsule hotel concept are also refreshing additions and do much to correct the balance regarding Japan's built environment as an often overlooked element of both its artistic heritage and contemporary history.

The tone throughout is a clean, breezy style that while - given the format of the book - naturally never shies away from handling often complex and potentially weighty topics, always manages to do so in a way that presents them at their leanest and most accessible. Often, compendiums of this nature feel like they present Japan as a kind of codebook, something to be deciphered and unlocked with almost mathematical difficulty. Here, the brevity of each entry ensures an almost business-like focus on key takeaways and the essential facts - you could almost imagine some of these entries as bullet-pointed Powerpoint slides, as opposed to entries in a book.

This constant eye toward demystification and dispelling of archetypes is worth singling out for particular praise. One might say that more than 150 years since Japan first opened its doors to the world, and in an age where the internet can satisfy even the most insatiably curious of questioners, surely there must be nothing left to 'demystify' about the nation? And yet, as chapters on geisha and ninja allude to - misconceptions and generalisations about Japan exist even to this day. Offering a well-informed tonic to these often illusory images, while simultaneously avoiding a wholesale stripping away of the attractive mystique they lend to Japan is a hard thing to do, but there is a role for it all the same, and this book is to be applauded for at the very least attempting to tackle these tricky areas.

Does a book like this contribute to and further orientalist visions of Japan into the 21<sup>st</sup> century? I think the answer to that question is more complex than it might

initially seem. In the hands of a less skillful author, I think we could see this as just another in an endless torrent of 'images' of Japan that cascade into our consciousness, harking back to the famous Oscar Wilde line: 'Japan is a pure invention'. But instead, the comparative depth offered here - even in its 'quick takes' - in answering the ambiguities that people will always have about

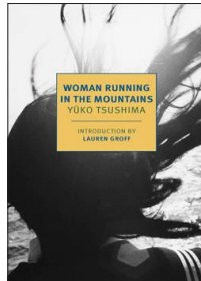
nations other than their own, does offer a particular service. There are many 'takes' on Japan, but as this book itself points out: 'Getting to know Japanese culture is a lifelong endeavor'. It is perhaps, then, through the very accumulation of said 'takes' that we finally reach toward somewhere approximating a better, more genuine understanding. §

## Woman Running in the Mountains

by Tsushima Yuko  
translated by Geraldine Harcourt

The New York Review of Books (2022)  
ISBN-13: 978-1681375977

Review by Laurence Green



In a world where the daily cycle of new media seems to march at an ever quicker pace, a parallel path has begun to open, one which offers something new, by way of something old - the 're-discovery'. Films, books or albums lost to time the first go around, or perhaps simply ripe for new appraisal. When the stars align in just the right manner, these fresh opportunities for old works to shine can go so far as to shift our understanding of pre-conceived historical narratives of a body of work. New names rise to the fore of the discourse, and our contemporary understanding of a canon we thought we knew so well - 'Japanese Literature' - thrums with the tantalising pulse of something that feels like it has been biding its time until this precise moment. Now uncorked and set free, we can't get enough of it. Yuko Tsushima (1947-2016) - youngest daughter of famed writer Osamu Dazai, who committed suicide when she was only a year old - is perhaps, one such author.

Following on from the immensely encouraging success of handsome re-releases by Penguin Modern Classics of Tsushima's previous works *Territory of Light* and *Child of Fortune*, The New York Review of Books' edition of *Woman Running in the Mountains* - originally published in Japanese in 1980 - is simultaneously a novel that you could recommend to a first time reader of Japanese literature, and to a seasoned longtime lover who feels they've read everything there is to offer from those works available in English translation. As with the above-mentioned previous works from Tsushima, *Woman Running in the Mountains* is ably translated once again by Geraldine Harcourt (who sadly passed away in 2019).

Our protagonist this time around is Odaka Takiko; pregnant as a result of a brief affair with a married

man, she is now a source of sorrow and shame to her abusive parents. For Takiko however, the child represents opportunity - something wholly her own, and a route to a new sense of meaning and direction in her life, no matter how challenging that path might be. Focused tightly around a central theme of maternity, Takiko's pregnancy, the experience of giving birth, and then of motherhood itself, are spelled out in granular detail here. Hard reality confronts her at every turn, her status as a single mother serving as a foundational stigma that all else stems from - not least the grating relationship with her judgmental mother. The novel's early movements focus on Takiko's stress in securing a place for her child in a nursery - the staff inform her that many mothers will put their names down on waiting lists as soon as they discover they are pregnant, such is the intense demand for places.

Some of what we hear can be shocking - particularly to 21<sup>st</sup> century sensibilities. An informative footnote a third of the way into the book tells us of the distinction in Japanese family registers between a child being registered as 'male' instead of 'first son', a status distinguishing illegitimate from legitimate children. Copies of the family register are required for official procedures such as school enrollments and job applications; as such, Japan has a very low illegitimacy rate - 0.8% at the time the novel was written in 1980, compared to 18.4 in the United States. Later segments of the novel take on an almost diary-like feel, the passing days chopped up into segments punctuated by the baby's bodily functions: '7:00 - Began to cry. 7:15 - Formula (180cc). Crying louder. 8:30 - To sleep. Woke up right away and yelled'. The pace is relentless, the demands never-ending. Takiko must endure.

Crucially however, and somewhat at odds with many contemporary literary authors writing on similar themes today, the tone is never vitriolic in nature. There is very little hate, regret or frustration to be found in these pages - only a coolly dispassionate observance of the act of motherhood and its implications for a woman. The novel feels both incredibly prescient in its ability to resonate with later waves of feminist literature - eg.



Mieko Kawakami's *Breasts and Eggs* - but also feels like it is part of a trajectory belonging solely to Tsushima alone.

There are some interesting translation idiosyncrasies, that given a more contemporary style, one feels might have been handled differently. We often hear of 'arrowroot jellies', which no doubt would have been left simply as *kuzumochi* now. Harcourt's translation in fact dates back to 1991, and it is striking to think that 30 years on, we are now as far away from the world of the novel as the 1950s or 60s would have seemed to those living through the 80s and 90s. Harcourt's translation - at once at a remove from both past and present - achieves a particularly lucid quality, emphasising the artistic cleanliness of Tsushima's prose all the more. The life of the protagonist might be a particular kind of mundane everyday experience - but there is incredible beauty to be found in this simplicity.

This edition is appended by an introduction from Lauren Groff - who will be familiar to many as the author of the popular novel *Fates and Furies*. Her insightful preface tells us of Tsushima's place within the Japanese literary tradition of the I-Novel; a form of autofiction

that bears some similarity with the Western school of literary naturalism and came to hold particular allure with Japanese audiences through the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both through its extreme realism, and its unique access to the psychological states of its characters, the I-Novel's bewitching charms are self-evident in its blending of almost documentary-like observational qualities with a kind of hyper-intensity offered by the placement of the narrative voice firmly within the central 'I'. It is not merely that we come to see the world through their eyes, rather, we take on and embody every aspect of their lived existence, through to the smallest detail.

The greatest testament to Tsushima's power as a writer is that her work is uniquely balanced between cleanly palatable accessibility, and an aesthetic sense that feels almost as if it belongs in a stark contemporary art gallery. *Woman Running in the Mountains* is at once both literary and incredibly literal in its ability to paint with words the kinds of world we all inhabit from minute to minute, hour to hour. In every cluttered urban edifice, in every baby's cry, in every trickle of sweat; a realm of possibilities. [S](#)

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## Terminal Boredom

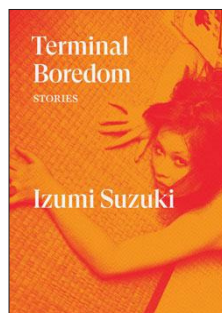
by Suzuki Izumi

translated by Polly Barton, Sam Bett, David Boyd, Daniel Joseph, Aiko Masubuchi, and Helen O'Horan

Verso (2021)

ISBN-13: 978-1788739887

Review by Laurence Green



Suzuki Izumi, born in 1949 and taking her own life in 1986 at the age of thirty-six, seems in many ways the very definition of a cult figure. Both a countercultural icon and genuinely pioneering figure in Japanese literature, she would initially find fame as a model and actress before securing her reputation as a writer.

This collection of short stories was originally released in Japan as *Keiyaku: Suzuki Izumi SF Zenshuu (Covenant: The Complete Science Fiction of Suzuki Izumi)* and you have to wonder whether with the cover art and re-titling to *Terminal Boredom* used in this English release, there was a desire to play down the science fiction aspect in favour of a more general 'quirkiness' that would fit into the broader English language market for what Japanese fiction represents right now. The insides may stay the same, but the wrapping - in a way - makes all the difference. There have been many excellent volumes of Japanese short stories in translation released recently -

Murakami Haruki's *First Person Singular* and Nakajima Kyoko's *Things Remembered and Things Forgotten* chief among them - Suzuki Izumi's collection however, is without a doubt one of the strangest.

Taken as a whole, *Terminal Boredom* comes on like a high-intensity cocktail of distinctly bizarre tales that invariably, through a particularly slanted, satire-driven look at issues of gender, sex and drug use, force us to see the familiar from new, compelling angles. A *New York Times* review drew an apt comparison between Suzuki and Ursula K. Le Guin; and certainly, stories like 'Women And Women' - the first tale in this collection, and also arguably the best - feel very much a pair with classics like Le Guin's 1969 masterpiece *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

In 'Women And Women', the science fiction "concept" is front and centre, inescapable. Pollution has caused the male birth rate to decline dramatically. Men are now incredibly scarce - seen more like livestock than genuine humans - confiscated immediately on the rare occasion one is born. What remains is a 'queer matriarchal utopia' populated solely by females - most movies and books from the time before are banned, and the only image of masculinity most women now receive comes from the uber charming heroes of still-permitted *shojo* girls manga. Many women now imitate these characters, while exchanging rumours of men being

able to somehow make women pregnant through the 'radiation' they emit.

One of the most fascinating aspects of this collection - ably handled by six different translators - is that each story feels like a kind of experiment; parameters tweaked, altered, and then a scenario allowed to play out. The resulting dramas, often small-scale and character-driven in nature, are all the more impactful because they force us to consider the ramifications of their science-fictionality on a personal level. In the genius 'Night Picnic', the last family in a desolated city must learn to be human by awkwardly appropriating popular culture. In a bizarre combo of keeping-up-with-the-Joneses aspiration and oddball sentences that almost look like typos until you realise they are the characters falling over themselves linguistically, we laugh at all those silly things that used to make up human "society".

The collection's tone veers unnervingly between the comic and the contemplative, punctuated from time to time with punky, expletive laden volleys - the swearing in particular feeling so at odds with what we are typically used to in English translations of Japanese literature. When the science-fiction concepts are dialled up to 100, things can even veer on the anime-esque. The "Gender Exclusion Terminal Occupancy Zone" in the first

story immediately springs to mind - a kind of zoo for men, complete with high school field trips to stop and stare at these strange creatures.

At other times, the outcome is more pensive - snippets of veracity that hold up a mirror to all worlds and all realities. The reader is a tourist through these strange vistas, but we are invited to question and critique at every juncture. Gender and gender roles remain constant themes, the titular story - which closes out the collection - offering a particularly incisive vignette:

The kind of men you see in the movies would be hard to handle in real life, though - they're so fixated on their own masculinity. And sometimes that male pride, that proper behaviour, it all starts to seem ridiculous. If they could just get over themselves, then everything might be a whole lot simpler.

Is it powerful feminist literature, or is it complex, geeky sci-fi? In truth, it's both - simultaneously and all at once - this combinatory existence becoming a merry-go-round of thought-play that continuously prods at the most bewildering aspects of humanity. Suzuki's writing is a 20<sup>th</sup> century *Gulliver's Travels* through a weird multiverse of oddities, the satire biting with a sharpness that asks us to stop, consider, and then re-consider. §

## Age of Samurai: Battle for Japan

directed by Stephen Scott

Available on Netflix

Review by Riyoko Shibe

*Age of Samurai: Battle for Japan*, a six-part Netflix historical documentary series, retells the final decades of the *Sengoku Jidai*, a 150-year period of near continuous civil war. Seventeen historians speak on the show, examining the reunification of Japan through the rise of three figures: Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu. Beginning in 1551 with the death of Oda Nobun and the rise of his son, Oda Nobunaga, the show ends in 1616, with Tokugawa Ieyasu's rise to power and the beginning of the Tokugawa Shogunate.

The samurai and Japan's feudal era (1185-1868) have long become locked in Western imagination through media, film, and books, with each reconfiguration inspiring another. *The Magnificent Seven* would be the most obvious, an Old-West remake of Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*, while films like *The Last Samurai*, the



book *Shogun* by James Clavell, or even the game *Ghosts of Tsushima*, further rework these imageries. It might be remiss to reference these fictional works in relation to a documentary series, for there is no real expectation for the former to be grounded in historical accuracy. But in the case of *Age of Samurai*, a documentary which repackages myth as history, and which uses tropes to advance a two-dimensional narrative, the comparison is warranted.

In interviews, the show is clear in having taken inspiration from these fictional reworkings, specifically from Kurosawa's films, *Game of Thrones*, and manga. Thus, each historian is shown in black and white, sitting centred and looking directly into the camera, while dramatic re-enactments occur in desaturated hues. Scenes changes are signalled by the camera panning across a drawn map, upon which protagonists' faces appear and disappear often in a wash of red blood. The effect of this, if you like it, is fun, drawing on the aesthetics of fictional blockbusters that audiences of both Japanese and Western film, and readers of manga, would recognise. But focusing entirely on this imagery risks diluting the legitimacy of the show.

Legitimacy is further weakened by editing choices which disrupt the narration. Seventeen talking head interviews are too much, and the editing - cutting up

each historians' contribution into second-long sentences which often repeat each other - creates a confused and inefficient narrative. Distracting metaphors and hyperbole also litter the show: each battle is described as the biggest in Japanese history; the katana is described as "widely regarded as probably the finest sword made in world history"; and the samurai are referred to as "probably the greatest warriors history has ever known".

This disjointed narrative could be the result of the directors' vision. In an interview, *Age of Samurai's* showrunner Matthew Booi says that 'the biggest challenge filmmakers have when telling big-picture history is, how do you avoid chronology? Chronology isn't entertaining'. While this is said to stress the aim of the series to showcase the role of a few central figures, it seems the "big picture" is retold at the expense of wider social and political context needed for the plot to make sense, or basic detail and nuance necessary to build a historically accurate and logical narrative.

The big-picture storyline also leans on the trope of the honour-bound but violent samurai, seemingly for entertainment value rather relevance or accuracy. Episode four, for instance, dedicates over three minutes to a dramatisation of Date Masamune ripping out his own eye because of the shame associated with a physical impairment caused by smallpox, which seems superfluous given that this event exists only in legend. The *seppuku* (a form of suicide) we see generally last over a minute, while a scene of a child being beheaded in front of her mother is reused four times over two episodes. The violence feels gratuitous and largely unnecessary as the series rarely explains the broader context of why these killings are happening beyond abject violence or defending honour and legacy.

This trope of honour and violence is a mythical political symbolism layered onto modern media reworkings of the samurai, a myth intertwined with Japanese nationalism. The samurai were reimagined initially by Nitobe Inazo in 1900 in his English-language book *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*, which drew fictional associations between samurai and a benevolent, intrinsic honour-code. Later, this concept would be reimported back into Japan and layered onto the nation's feudal era, and would ultimately be used by the imperial government to force Japanese soldiers to fight until death in the wartime period, bound to this invented historical legacy.

Many fictional interpretations of this era have fallen into this pattern: in *The Last Samurai*, Nathan Algren is bent on defending traditional samurai honour, while in *Ghosts of Tsushima*, *bushido* defines the protagonist's

development as he makes decisions between staying true to this honourific code, or betraying it through dishonourable acts. *Bushido* is not so overt in *Age of Samurai*: although the historians occasionally lead with these mythologies, for instance referring vaguely to 'the ancient traditions of the samurai', they do not explicitly mention the term. The samurai's relentless violence and brutality certainly comes through, and there is no doubt that these were anything but a peace-keeping caste.

Notions of "honour" nonetheless underly the show. In an interview, Matthew Booi says of the period that there was, 'a mix of unbelievable violence with incredible honor and duty... [an] obsession with honor and legacy'. The concept thus comes through with much screen time devoted to long, drawn out *seppuku* and battles tending to end with the commander committing *seppuku* to avoid a dishonourable death. In other events, power-grabs are conceived through protagonists wishing to preserve their legacy. There is little other explanation of motivations or drivers of events and individuals, dulling the narrative and ultimately reusing these worn out, mythical tropes of honour and duty.

A final oversight: gender. Of the 17 historians, only two are women, Lesley Downer and Kitagawa Tomoko, who speak solely on women's history. Each historian has been selected for a specific area of expertise: Elijah Bender, for instance, speaks mostly on the clash between Oda Nobunaga and Takeda Shingen, while Nathan Ledbetter talks on the Battle of Nagashino. However, because each contribution is limited to single sentences, often repeated by the next speaker, attributing specific knowledge to individuals becomes difficult. It is thus hard to understand the logic of keeping women's history to solely women historians, who have broad subject knowledge and expertise. The female storylines in the show, too, seem very watered down; the women exist solely as wives and concubines, draped half naked on a futon, having sex with a man, or screaming as they, or their child, are being brutally murdered. Lady Chacha, wife to Toyotomi Hideyoshi, is the only woman given some depth, and the only one who is given any dialogue.

*Age of Samurai* is a show defined by a Western, male optic, and could be suitable for an audience new to Japanese history, but historical inaccuracies aside, it seems it would be a difficult watch for anyone given its male centrism, gratuitous violence, and confused plotline. Without wider political and historical context, an entire period is ultimately portrayed as a purely barbaric time in history with key figures driven only by an inherent urge for abject violence and a sprinkling of honour. S