

Welcome to the February issue of *The Japan Society Review*, the first in our thirteenth volume of the publication. We enter 2018 with renewed enthusiasm, bringing you reviews of interesting books, films and other events related to Japan. In this issue, we include reviews of two academic books, one focusing on the past and the other considering the future of Japanese politics and nationalism, an anthology of short stories by writers based in Kyoto, a book which received the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation Award and a Japanese film from The Japan Foundation Touring Film Programme 2018.

Focusing on five controversial issues, *Rethinking Japan: The Politics of Contested Nationalism* explores Japan's future prospects under the political direction of Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's government. From another perspective, but sharing the contentious issue of historic revisionism, *The History Problem. The Politics of War Commemoration in East Asia*, documents the forms of war commemoration 'against the background of a shifting

international landscape in East Asia, and of evolving national perceptions about World War II in Japan'.

The two fiction books reviewed in this issue show the interest of non-Japanese writers in writing about Japan. *Echoes: Writers in Kyoto Anthology 2017* is a compilation of memories, fictional accounts, poems and literary extracts which draw on individual experiences of Kyoto by a group of writers currently living or remembering their time in the city. The second fiction book is *My Falling Down House* by Jayne Joso, which offers a wonderful exploration of human sociality and isolation through the monologues of her fascinating character.

To conclude our February issue, the review of the film *Japanese Girls Never Die* offers some insights on the refreshing take on girl power depicted in the narrative, 'a story of women who cannot find their place in Japanese society regardless of their efforts to fit in'.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

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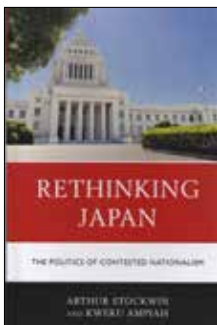
Image from the cover of *My Falling Down House*

## Rethinking Japan: The Politics of Contested Nationalism

by Arthur Stockwin and Kweku Ampiah

Lexington Books (2017)  
ISBN: 978-1-4985-3792-6

Review by Sir Hugh Cortazzi  
(The following is an opinion piece based on this book originally published by *The Japan Times* on 9 March).



Japan's continuing importance should not need restating, but Japan's future prospects are not so clear. Serious questions need to be asked about the direction and policies being pursued by the government of Prime Minister Abe Shinzo.

An important new book *Rethinking Japan: The Politics of Contested Nationalism* by two senior British scholars of Japan Arthur Stockwin and Kweku Ampiah, discusses the main contentious issues facing Japan. Their worrying conclusion is that 'The new Japan that is emerging... will be more controlled, less democratic, less oriented towards peace, more internationally assertive, more inclined to confront neighboring countries, more unequal, more stressed, more concerned to flaunt national traditions reflecting the ethos of a militaristic past, more inward looking and less internationalist than the world became used to in the postwar years'.

This is a disturbing conclusion. How far is it justified? The authors, after outlining the political history of Japan since the war, discuss in some depth the changes wrought in Japan's political system by electoral reform and the decline of the factions (*habatsu*). They draw particular attention to the growing strength of right wing nationalism in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and stress the importance for Japan of success being achieved by 'Abenomics'.

Their concerns focus on five main issues, namely constitutional revision, the 'Designated Secrets Law' and freedom of speech, historical revisionism, legislating for collective self-defense, relations with Japan's neighbors and with the rest of the world. Each issue is discussed in some detail and the arguments set out logically.

The LDP's proposals for revision of the postwar constitution are worrying. Apart from the proposed amendments to Article 9, which could undermine Japan's commitment to peace, they detract from Japan's commitment to upholding universal human

rights by asserting the primacy of Japan's 'unique' cultural heritage.

Prime Minister Abe, who has recently won endorsement for a third term in office, has managed to achieve a two-thirds majority in both houses of the diet. It would thus theoretically be possible for the LDP to get parliamentary approval for amendments to the constitution and seek the endorsement of the electorate in a referendum, although it is not clear how far he could rely on his allies in Komeito to support what would be a risky strategy.

One of Mr. Abe's achievements has been stability. Any attempt to change the constitution would arouse large-scale public protest and would be destabilizing. Mr. Abe is a pragmatist and should recognize that his economic policies cannot succeed unless stability is maintained.

The Americans saw the Japanese government as 'a leaky sieve'. To meet this criticism the 'Designated Secrets' Law was pushed through the diet without adequate debate. Its provisions, which remind some of the absurd lengths to which the prewar military went to preserve secrecy, do not contain adequate safeguards to prevent action being taken against whistleblowers and investigative journalists.

The law does not seem to have been misused so far, but the way in which NHK has been manipulated to support government policies and the pressures applied to deter critical comments even in prestigious foreign newspapers such as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* are disturbing. These measures suggest a government, which is oversensitive to critical reporting and waiting for the chance to act against its critics.

Freedom of speech can only be preserved if the Japanese media uphold *The Guardian's* slogan 'facts are sacred, comment is free'. Unfortunately parts of the Japanese media act like pussycats being stroked and fed through the *kisha* club system. If tested we must hope that they will show their claws and use them to defend their freedom.

Historical revisionism is grist to the advocates of constitutional amendments and of controls on press freedom. In the 'post truth' society promoted by Donald Trump who sees the media as his enemies, the more frequently lies are repeated the more they tend to be believed. As a survivor from war service in Asia, I find it particularly difficult to swallow the lies and distortions of Japanese historical revisionists, but we should not get this side issue out of proportion.

The way in which legislation for collective self-defense was enacted by 'fiat' aroused anger among

devotees of Japan's peace constitution. But Japan was under great pressure, both from its American ally and from the growing military power of China and the militarization of islets in the South China Sea, to beef up its defense forces and commit them to support their ally. If this legislation had not been enacted Japan would have been in even greater difficulties with President Trump than it is today.

Japan's relations with China are complicated by history as well as the way in which bilateral trade and investment have developed. The Japanese government mishandled the Senkaku problem and official visits to the Yasukuni shrine were provocative, but the Chinese government allowed nationalist anti-Japanese sentiment to get out of hand and blame for the present unhappy relationship rests to a significant extent with the Chinese authorities.

Relations with the Republic of Korea (ROK) ought to be much better than they are. The Japanese handling of the 'comfort women' problem under pressure from the right-wing revisionists and Japanese harping on their right to the barren Takeshima rocks in the Sea of Japan were insensitive.

Japan, the ROK and China all need to concentrate now on countering the growing menace from North Korea. Pragmatism and restraint should guide Japan's policies in Asia. Japan is becoming more assertive

in relations with the rest of the world. We shall have to get used to the change that has come rather late. But Japan's newfound assertiveness is hampered by the still inadequate command of English and failure to speak out in public of Japanese in international meetings and by the reluctance of Japanese young people to study abroad.

Japan's future hangs to a great extent on the success of Abenomics and on the handling of the demographic crisis facing Japan. How can Japan cope with an aging and declining population while maintaining its economic achievements unless it alters radically its immigration policies and its obsession with its cultural 'uniqueness'?

The immediate problem for Japan is how to adjust to the unpredictable President Trump. Prime Minister Abe has tried hard to get alongside the President. This may work to Japan's advantage but there are dangers in cooperating too closely with a populist leader with autocratic tendencies.

We must hope that Mr. Abe's pragmatism and the Japanese people's adherence to democratic principles and human rights will be sufficiently strong to overcome the threats facing Japan today and prove that the fears of the authors of this thought provoking book are not borne out by events. §

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## The History Problem. The Politics of War Commemoration in East Asia

by Saito Hiro

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i /  
Hawai'i Press (2017)  
ISBN-13: 978-0824874391

Review by Dr Andrew Levidis



Remembrance of war is seared into the landscape of East Asia. Hiroshima, Nanjing, Tokyo fire-bombings, and the breaching of the Yellow River, these names call forth the battlefields and ruins of Japan's multiethnic empire, and conjure up shadows of the great conflagration which in the 1930s and 1940s wrought unprecedented violence and destruction in East Asia. At the denouement of these interconnected imperial and civil wars, waged on and off between 1931 and 1949, the geopolitics of the region were convulsively transformed: The Great Japanese Empire disintegrated in 1945; the People's Republic of China was declared

in 1949 following the victory of Mao Zedong in the revolutionary war (1937-1949); and the post-colonial lands of the Korean nation were divided and soon at war (1950-1953).

It is these phantoms of Japan's imperium, and the complex post-1945 landscape of commemoration and memorialization that Hiro Saito wrestles with in this thoughtful account, whose arguments span the different fields of East Asian history, war commemoration, sociology, and memory studies. The "history problem" is an umbrella term that has been used to describe the ensemble of issues including apologies and reparations for the foreign victims of Imperial Japan's wars (1931-1945), prime ministerial visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, where spirits of Japan's war dead are enshrined, and narratives of World War II in Japanese school textbooks. The History Problem is a rich and penetrating study of the vociferous debates and interactions among political parties and social movements of the right and left, over how to memorialize the Second World War and its legacies in post-imperial Japanese

society. Saito adroitly documents the decades-long struggle to institutionalize cosmopolitan forms of commemoration against the background of a shifting international landscape in East Asia, and evolving national perceptions about World War II in Japan.

*The History Problem* comprises two major layers of analysis over seven chapters. The introduction outlines the book's analytical framework in terms of shifting configurations of nationalism and cosmopolitanism – the two foci of commemoration. Saito argues the politics of war commemoration in East Asia are “fundamentally relational,” (6) and enmeshed in self-serving stories of defeat, revolution, and national liberation still prevalent in Tokyo, Beijing and Seoul. The first four chapters comprise a tour d'horizon of war commemoration from 1945 to the early twenty-first century. Chapter 1 illustrates how the early years of organizing and hard lobbying by the Japan Bereaved Families Association (Nihon Izokukai) to restore pensions and social welfare to the families of fallen soldiers and injured veterans, represented a crucial step in shaping official commemoration which, with few exceptions, failed to embrace former imperial subjects and mobilized populations. It is this logic of commemoration, politically and territorially bounded to the nation-state after 1945, and reinforced by Cold War ideologies, which Saito argues circumscribed “cosmopolitan” recognition of foreign victims of the atomic bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Chapter 2 examines how in the wake of normalization of diplomatic relations with South Korea (1965) and China (1972), newly mobilized transnational networks of activists led the Japanese government to begrudgingly extend welfare support to Korean A-bomb survivors; and also inhibited attempts to restore Yasukuni Shrine to the center of official commemorations in the 1980s.

The ending of the Cold War in the 1990s brought with it a far-reaching reexamination of long suppressed issues of compensation (Korean comfort women, Chinese forced laborers) flowing from Imperial Japan's total war mobilization against China and the Allies. Chapter 3 shows how shifting geopolitical forces, together with the brief domestic political realignment after the fall of the long-governing Liberal Democratic Party in 1993, ushered in explicitly cosmopolitan projects to address historically marginalized Asian victims. Chapter 4 reveals neither a clean victory for nationalism or cosmopolitanism in Japanese war commemoration in the 2000s, and chronicles the deepening brutalization of the wartime past in East Asia, together with the growing enmeshment of the

“history problem” with territorial disputes (Liancourt, Senkaku islands).

The essential and most thought-provoking arguments of this book reside in chapter 5 in which Saito argues for re-examination of key tenets of the postwar legal edifice, namely the judgement of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (1946-1948), to take into account the longer histories of imperialism and colonial rule, thus enabling recognition of Japan as both perpetrator and victim. In Chapter 6, Saito makes explicit the essentially progressive thrust of his intellectual project when he proposes historians, a “transnational epistemic community,” (178) play a crucial role in reorienting remembrance towards the common ground of shared suffering.

*The History Problem* is a poignant, yet essentially hopeful, call for transcending the shibboleths of narrow forms of nationalism in war commemoration in East Asia. It is not however, entirely unproblematic. Saito's analytical framework is ambitious, and at times overburden the book with his insistence on a starkly dichotomous relationship of nationalism and cosmopolitanism in which little room is left for the subtleties, ironies, and messiness of lived historical experience. There is an inescapable sense that these abstract and formalistic distinctions shut Saito off from other possible configurations of war commemoration. One wonders of the possibilities for collective remembrance of the military war dead of Japan, China and Korea, a veritable “community of the fallen,” transcending borders and uniting individuals and families in mourning and contemplation of the horrors of war. The (albeit ambivalent) role played by former Japanese Imperial Army officers, South Manchurian Railway officials, and right-wing politicians as intermediaries between Japan and the “New China” in the 1950s, further militates against such a clear separation between cosmopolitan and nationalist ethos.

*The History Problem* is at its weakest when dealing with postwar political parties which are either to be condemned (LDP) or condoned (JCP, JSP). One would be forgiven for assuming that very little has changed between the Liberal Democratic Party of the 1950s and its early-twenty first century incarnations. Yet far from the monolithic “defender of nationalist commemoration” (72) that Saito portrays, the LDP's position has always been the consequence of fierce intra-party contestation and evolving political imperatives. Intriguingly, one wonders how the shifting landscape of war commemoration was impacted when

the generation of political leaders, who had come of age in the last decades of the Japanese Empire, yielded power to younger colleagues not directly implicated in wartime atrocities?

While Saito's nuanced argument to de-center the judgement of the Tokyo War Crimes Trials from the politics of war commemoration is well taken, he misses an opportunity to reach back to Chinese BC war crimes trials and the ideal of "justice over revenge" to restore previously elided possibilities beyond victim and perpetrator.[1] *The History Problem* points to how war commemoration is bound up in deeper historical processes, namely, de-imperialization, military defeat, and Allied occupation which established important precedents – legal and political – that continue to influence the Japanese government's notion of state responsibility. A stronger account would examine how nationalism was mobilized in nineteenth and twentieth century nation-building projects in Japan, Korea, and China, to better understand the role nationalist forms of commemoration played in legitimizing state power after 1945.

What then of historians? I am not entirely convinced by this book's argument for historians to assume a greater role in the public sphere to adjudicate unresolved issues stemming from war and Japanese empire-building. Saito presumes a fundamentally benign understanding of the writing of history – which can divide as much as unite – and of the historical profession which is not necessarily driven by the rubric of cosmopolitanism, but just as often has deep roots in the nation-state.

For all the reservations made above, *The History Problem* is an important addition to the growing literature on Japan's war commemoration that contributes much to our understanding of larger questions of justice, politicized history, and collective memory in East Asia.

[1] Barak Kushner, *Men to devils, devils to men: Japanese war crimes and Chinese justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 305. §

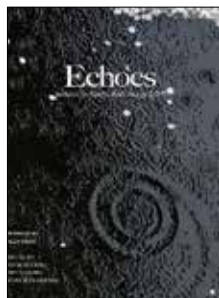
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## Echoes: Writers in Kyoto Anthology 2017

edited by John Dougill, Amy Chavez and Mark Richardson

Writers in Kyoto (2017)  
ISBN-13: 978-1387479115

Review by Harry Martin



Founded in the 8th century, Kyoto is the dignified and enigmatic Grande Dame of Japan, stoically fostering and preserving Japan's cultural heritage over the centuries while her more effusive cousins such as Tokyo and Osaka storm ahead in their enthusiastic embrace of internationalisation and modern innovation.

*Echoes*, the 'Writers in Kyoto's' 2017 Anthology, is a compilation of short stories (fact and fiction), poems and literary extracts which draw on individual experiences and the personal influence Kyoto has exerted on a selection of writers who have lived or are living in and around Kyoto. The themes are broad and focus on an eclectic and esoteric range of topics incorporating *haiku*, ceramics, traditional interiors, child rearing, sake vessels and classical poetry as well as personal stories, all of which may, at first, sound too specific in focus to be enjoyed by readers without prior knowledge or interest. However, the works are well considered and delivered in styles which capture

the imagination, likely to appeal to a range of different readers.

Not having previously come across the Writers in Kyoto's writing collective, I was surprised to find that the members are almost exclusively non-Japanese nationals. My initial feelings were that a body of work covering such unique and endemically Japanese traditions – within the context of Japan's most culturally important city – felt almost to be a form of appropriation when told through the experience of non-Japanese writers. However as I read on I found the foreign perspective on these distinctly Japanese topics provided a fresh and insightful viewpoint, unmarred by cultural boundaries that can be erected when handled by the Japanese experts.

These are all writers who clearly love Kyoto, some well-known such as the Japanologist Alex Kerr (*Lost Japan, Dogs and Demons: The Fall of Modern Japan, Another Kyoto*) and John Dougill (*In Search of Japan's Hidden Christians*), and others who happen to live or work in the city and have been entranced by its unique characteristics and eccentricities. The contributions are a mix between expert and laity, all coming together though a shared admiration and experience of this city, offering a wonderfully varied collection to read through.

I particularly enjoyed Jeff Robbins' insightful new translations of some of Basho's *haiku*. I have always felt haiku to be a uniquely Japanese form of expression which I have just not been able to understand. However through Robbins' careful and beautifully thought-out translations and explanations, the art has suddenly become more animated, which was a surprising and unforeseen outcome when I first picked up the book.

Aside from this, a large part of the appeal of *Echoes* is the diversity in content. The variation in style and theme will allow most readers the opportunity to find something of interest, whether in the factual essays on pottery styles or in the touching stories about love and loss.

I do feel that the book is perhaps best enjoyed by those with a personal experience of Kyoto or Japan as

there is a lot of reference to geography and landmarks which may be lost on those who have never been or haven't a particularly strong interest in the culture. I also felt it a great shame that the imagery in the book is in black and white, depriving the reader of what seem to be striking and beautifully photographed colour pictures to accompany some of the works.

Overall, this is a reflective collection of work celebrating the international appeal of Japan, its ancient capital and the unique and varied culture it has to offer. It is touching to read first-hand how Kyoto has influenced people in different ways, and to witness the profound effect it has had on people's lives and the paths they have chosen to follow. §

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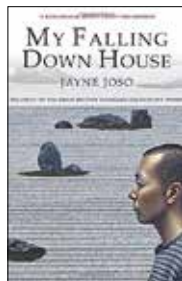
## My Falling Down House

by Jayne Joso

Seren (2016)

ISBN-13: 978-1781723395

Review by Alice French



It is difficult to envision, in our world dominated by the internet and social media, the sensation of being truly and utterly alone. Without the comforting sounds of the television or radio, the reassuring smartphone notifications, or the background hum of Spotify playlist. Imagine going for a day, or even just an hour, without any kind of human interaction, or any technological proof of one's membership to society. For me, it is virtually impossible to picture being so alone, with only one's own thoughts for company; and the prospect is, quite frankly, terrifying.

It is difficult to say whether Joso's masterful *My Falling Down House* is an advertisement for, or a warning against, such isolation from society. It follows the thoughts, dreams and humble adventures of Tanaka Takeo, as he comes to terms with living alone, and in turn comes to terms with himself. After losing his job and splitting up with his girlfriend, the protagonist is left with nothing but "an abandoned and dilapidated" house, a cat, and a cello to his name. Shut off from human contact, material possessions, and food, Takeo is reduced to the rawest form of the self, often referring to himself as foetal in his musings. We find ourselves immersed in his, often nonsensical, conversations with himself and experience hallucinations through his eyes. From the euphoria he finds in natural sunlight, to his

distress that comes with the loss of his hair, Joso allows us intimate insight into Takeo's every up and down.

Joso's mastery lies in her ability to make a seemingly inaccessible scenario relatable. Takeo's monologue is interspersed with beautifully eloquent metaphors and poetic breaks that make it easy to get lost in her narrative. The blatantly absurd becomes almost sensible as Joso leads the reader into Takeo's delusional self. We are so immersed, in fact, that his decisive plan to 'plant' his bare head in the ground in order to regrow his head hair seems feasible. Even Takeo himself later admits that 'attempting to plant my un-plant-like self is now the most unique event in my life'.

Despite the loneliness, hunger, and near insanity, *My Falling Down House* is ultimately a celebration of the self. Starved of everything else, Takeo discovers that 'what remains is ambition... box dwelling ambitions'. As the legendary Abe Kobo alluded to in *The Box Man*, give a man an empty box, and he will create a home. Takeo finds that "a box is a house is a place," which is all one really needs for self-exploration. Although Takeo's isolation is at times bleak, and there are indeed moments when Joso leads us to believe he won't make it, free from the conventions of society, his inner self actually thrives. The burden of societal expectations is reduced to nothing more than Takeo's almost comical obsession with his hair, which he sees as a symbol of his formerly successful salaryman lifestyle.

In such a way, *My Falling Down House* provides a welcome escape from the everyday stress of living in modern society. It is a reminder of the basic importance of understanding one's self in a world where we are constantly bombarded with virtual versions of others.

Left with no one to compare himself to, Takeo Tanaka does not fade into insignificance, but rather his self becomes the only significant thing in his life. The direction of his thoughts, his relationship with nature, his search for sustenance, are all that consume him. While Takeo does learn never to take for granted the luxuries allowed by societal interaction, what he ultimately discovers is the impermanence and

insignificance of them all. As Abe Kobo asserted more than forty years ago, and as still rings true in Joso's novel today, "the world intends to keep its mouth entirely shut" about the feasibility of living without participation in and cooperation with modern society. What matters is an understanding and acceptance of the self, and nothing else. §

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## Japanese Girls Never Die

directed by Matsui Daigo

Showing at The Japan Foundation Touring Film Programme (screened at the ICA in London, 10 February 2018)

Review by Morgane Chinal-Dargent

For the 2018 Touring Film Programme, The Japan Foundation put together a variety of contemporary Japanese films under the audacious and promising theme of *(Un)true Colours: Secrets and Lies in Japanese Cinema*. Through this selection, viewers can discover elements of the hidden face of Japanese culture alongside some new and unique Japanese movies. The film *Japanese Girls Never Die* (*Azumi Haruko wa yukue fumei*, A.K.A Azumi Haruko is Missing, 2016) by Matsui Daigo was undoubtedly one of them.

As the original title indicates, the film focuses on the disappearance of Azumi Haruko (Aoi Yu), a 27 years old woman who lives in a suburban city and shares her house with her mother, father and grand-mother. She works as an office lady in a small company where she has to confront the misogynistic behaviour of her two older male colleagues every day. As we follow the young woman in her daily life we observe how the people she meets throughout the film constantly bombard her with comments regarding her life and constantly stress the importance that she get married as soon as possible in order to escape the mundane life she leads. Seeking to escape such a dull existence, she attempts to date her neighbour and childhood friend Soga (Ishizaki Huey), but with no success as the young man proves himself unable to fulfil Haruko's expectations.

The young woman's story slowly rejoins the one of Aina (Takahata Mitsuki), who, like Haruko, suffers from the crushing monotony of life. Bubbly and energetic she is desperate for love and adventure and thinks she has found the answer in Yukio (Taiga), a former classmate who it seems is only interested in fun and one nights stands. As a present for his birthday, Aina offers Yukio a DVD about Banksy which is how we

segue into the film's second plot thread: Yukio and yet another classmate, Manabu (Hayama Shono), tagging the town with Haruko's missing poster as a stencil. As this plays out, the radio plays in the background, warning men about the danger caused by a high school girl's gang beating men up at night.



Image from *Japanese Girls Never Die*

Matsui Daigo has chosen female protagonists yet again as he did in his previous film *Our Huff and Puff Journey* (*Watashitachi no haa haa*, 2015), which followed a group of high school girls on a road trip. With this latest film, adapted from the novel of Mariko Yamauchi, Matsui initiates his critical thinking concerning Japan. Through the gaze of his observational camera, he profiles a society deeply rooted in patriarchy in which women struggle to find their place.

*Japanese Girls Never Die's* non-chronological narrative can appear misleading at times, but the strength of the film resides in the dramatic irony that the viewer knows since the beginning that Haruko is going to disappear. This constantly prompts the audience to question the circumstances regarding her vanishing. Subsequently, this creates a tension that keeps the viewer engaged and on the lookout for any details to connect the three plots of an increasingly complex story. While we think we already know the outcome of the film, Matsui constantly challenges and surprises us, achieving an unexpected ending

supported by a subtle and precise scenario, validating the talent of the young director.

The real strength of the film lays in the contrast the director creates between two worlds: the female and the male. This is reflected in the discrepancy between the fantasies the female protagonists have been conditioned to long for and the reality they live. In turn, the male characters are depicted as shallow, unfaithful or absent thorough. Through their dialogues we learn that they are solely attracted by youth, beauty and artifice. With cynicism, the director fulfils their wishes by giving them the high school girls they desire, but they are ready to beat them.



Image from *Japanese Girls Never Die*

At first sight, they look like any other high school club you see constantly cropping up in popular Japanese culture, but Matsui chooses to show them as a new symbol, one of a generation aware of the gender struggle and seeking vengeance. What follows in their wake are fight scenes of pure violence, the images on screen contrasting with the naive laughter of the school girls. This manga inspired group of girls don't advocate gender equality, they literally fight for their right to exist at all. While Haruko, who does not belong to this generation of women, find herself fighting a lone battle and seems to have no choice but to disappear.

The leading actress, Aoi Yu, (who also appears in another Japan Foundation Film Touring Programme film, *Birds Without Names* directed by Shiraishi Kazuya), carries the role of Haruko with a sense of strength and accuracy thorough the film. She creates a character whose strength and truth allows the film to avoid stereotypes and enhance the narrative twist and turns, her passivity concealing something hidden thorough.

By following Haruko's story, we witness the heinous commentaries of obnoxious men which bring the film on the verge of surrealism sometimes, like in the scene when her colleagues tell her that unmarried women eggs's get rotten and when we have to painfully watch Haruko silently facing the commentary.

The contrast between women and men reaches its climax when Yukio and Manabu are propelled into the local art scene as their tags attract such attention that they are even able to open their very own 'Dream Land' – a park decorated with their graffiti tags. Through vandalism and without seeking it, the duo is rewarded with fame. By comparison, Haruko's efforts are rewarded only with her colleague's sexist and vile comments. Her face is remembered not as that of a disappeared woman but as a piece of art crafted by men.

In the end, the film tells the story of women who cannot find their place in Japanese society regardless of their efforts to fit in. Haruko tried to wear skirts at work, seeking to be more youthful as her male colleague advises her and attempts to conform to the stereotypes of love and marriage, only for her partner to reveal himself as unfaithful. Aina hides her extravagant personality under fake lashes, fake nails, oversized pink accessories to emphasise her femininity and hopefully attract her prince charming, but she ends up with a deceitful yankee who shamelessly trade her to his friend.

*Japanese Girls Never Die* shows us two worlds, unable to communicate with one another and to fulfil the unrealistic and outdated expectations set of the society where the gender roles are shown as hugely unbalanced. Thus, the film fits perfectly the theme of (Un)true Colours, as this depiction of the Japanese society is scarcely shown on the big screen. With his innovative message, Matsui reveals himself as a promising young director who understands the struggle of his and subsequent generations. He conveys a message of hope through his depiction of youth, one full of energy and the will to see things change. Japanese girls, indeed, never die, and with the dim prospects of Japan's plummeting birth rate in mind, the film offers a strong message that responds to the inability of men by allowing women the opportunity to forge their own way forward, amongst themselves, and offering to the audience a refreshing and well needed dose of girl power. [S](#)

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## Interested in writing for The Japan Society Review?

Please write to [alejandra.armendariz@japansociety.org.uk](mailto:alejandra.armendariz@japansociety.org.uk) with examples of your work and information about your knowledge of and interest in Japan.

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