
Book review:
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Japan's Aging Peace: Pacifism and Militarism in the Twenty-First Century, Tom Phuong Le, Columbia University Press, New York, 2021, xvi, 368 pp. + endmatter, ISBN 9780231199780 hb, http://cup.columbia.edu/book/japans-aging-peace/9780231199797

Since the end of the Cold War, the subject of Japan's remilitarisation has received an increasing amount of attention in scholarly and policymaking circles. By turns, researchers have sounded a warning, traced the extent and process by which it has apparently happened, or alternatively pondered why and how it has not come to pass as expected. These contributions have been of variable quality (and I hang my head in shame at this point) but taken together it would appear that little is left to be said in this space that is genuinely original. Tom Phuong Le, who on the basis of this book alone, is clearly a rising star in the fields of Japanese Studies and International Relations, has achieved the impressive feat of approaching a well-worn topic in an innovative way.

The original contribution immediately jumps out at the reader in the use of the word 'aging' in the book's title. As a result, I was half expecting an exploration of some kind of 'youthquake'. In other words, how generational differences in attitudes to issues of war and peace have emerged between a staunchly antimilitarist older generation, who remember the war, and a more nationalist younger generation in Japan. Demographics is certainly part of the argument that Le presents here, but it is only one element. The central question that motivates Le's research is much more prosaic: '[w]hy is Japan not a normal country' and, more specifically, '[w]hat determines the content and direction of Japanese security policy?' (p. 3). Le asks these questions '… to reevaluate how militarism and the use of force are discussed and justified in debates about security' (p. 3). These are worthy and extensively researched fields of enquiry but aging as a metaphor provides a new lens to explore them. Aging may suggest that someone or something has been weakened or is out-dated; alternatively it can denote wisdom and confidence accrued over time. In any case, '[a]ging forces one to confront the past, take stock of the present, and prepare for the future' (p. 5). Ultimately, Le argues that '[h]ow Japan addresses the process of aging and its consequences has far-reaching impacts for regional and global security' (p. 4).

Le strikes a balance and seeks synergies between material constraints and ideational restraints on Japanese remilitarisation. He argues that '… cultural, economic, and demographic forces have limited its embrace of conventional militarism as a tool of statecraft'. At the same time, a Japanese 'antimilitarism ecosystem' has developed over time, a term used to capture the context of resilient and still influential institutions of antimilitarism. This conceptualisation allows Le to embrace a wide range of factors at play from the domestic to the international, the societal to the technical, the political to the normative. The result, according to Le, is that 'Japan has not normalized as many have predicted because in many ways it *cannot* and in some ways, it *will not* [original emphases]' (p. 14).

Le supports this argument in eight carefully researched and engagingly written chapters. Chapter One provides the context and argument of this book before Chapter Two explores

the multiple militarisms that have emerged in Japan since the Meiji period through a whistle-stop historical review. This provides a more nuanced basis for understanding recent developments in Japan that are explored in the rest of the book than a one-size-fits-all definition of militarism that is regarded as no longer fit for purpose.

Chapter 3 focuses on people and asks the question 'who will fight?' by exploring how the multiple challenges associated with an aging and declining population constrain the policies and actions of both the Government of Japan (GOJ) and Japan Self-Defence Forces (JSDF), especially in terms of recruitment. One solution would be to replace 'old bodies with new machines' (p. 103). However, Chapter 4 paints a bleak picture of the related restraints and challenges faced by the GOJ and JSDF in terms of upgrading military technology and aging infrastructure with a focus on arms procurement.

Chapter 5 shifts the focus from the material to the ideational and evaluates the political restraints placed on the GOJ while carefully avoiding the conflation of pacifism and antimilitarism and teasing out different variants of the latter. Chapter 6 builds on the previous chapter by exploring Japan's culture of peace, associated social movements and sites of commemoration.

Chapter 7 picks up on the aspect of the aging metaphor that highlights wisdom and learning by analysing how Japan has successfully responded to a global humanitarian norm exemplified by the concept of human security. In concluding, Chapter 8 discusses one of late-Prime Minister Abe Shinzō's signature policies, the proactive contribution to peace, and argues in light of the preceding chapters that it is still firmly located within Japan's antimilitarism ecosystem. This chapter concludes with an interesting and provocative rumination on the role of scholars and the impact of their research on the conduct and understanding of international relations, which is much less jarring than it might sound.

Ultimately, Le argues that '[c]hange will occur, but the antimilitarism ecosystem ensures that it will be at the margins' (p. 33). No doubt there will be many that disagree with this conclusion and claim that Japan's remilitarisation presents a more substantial shift. However, regardless of one's position in these debates, it is impossible to fault the rigour with which Le has researched this book. He has taken an innovative approach based on an impressively inclusive body of empirical data to make an important contribution that will generate further debate for some time to come.

Alongside its significance for ongoing debates, this book is also notable for the enviable self-awareness, honesty and, dare I say, style with which Le has written it. Despite some minor typos that hardly represent a hill worth dying on (a missing macron and inconsistent name order) and a few too many North American sporting analogies to be immediately relatable, this is a highly readable book. It has the potential to appeal broadly across academic and policymaking communities, and ideally bring them together.

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