



**Jessamyn R. Abel.** *The International Minimum: Creativity and Contradiction in Japan's Global Engagement, 1933-1964.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015. 331 pp. \$54.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-4107-2.



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**Published on** H-Japan (January, 2016)

**Commissioned by** Simon Nantais (Simon Fraser University)

In *The International Minimum*, Jessamyn Abel convincingly highlights the underappreciated and deep links between the methods of Japanese diplomacy in times of peace and war from the 1920s to the 1960s. Specifically, she shows the resilience and malleability of internationalism—or faith that fostering cooperation among nations most effectively promotes peace, security and prosperity—as a guiding principle of Japanese officials and the public at large whether they were engaged in aggressive imperialism or democratic reconstruction (p. 8). Intricately tying together diplomatic decision making, sports, and cultural exchange, Abel demonstrates how the institutions, words, and deeds that grew from the Japanese embrace of Wilsonian internationalism after the First World War were deployed in support of the excesses of the 1930s and early 1940s as well as the building of a peaceful “new Japan” after 1945. To be sure, Japanese leaders throughout what Abel aptly calls the “transwar period” worked to advance national interests within the contexts of changing times. But after Japan’s withdrawal from the League of Nations in 1933, an “internationalist mindset” continued to evolve among Japanese, one that offered lessons to postwar statesmen and citizens alike on how to advance Japan’s place in world affairs. In short, Japan did not journey through

“a dark valley of unmitigated ultranationalism nestled between two peaks of pure internationalism” (p. 176). Rather than seek to isolate themselves even during the darkest days of the Fifteen Year War (1931-45), Japanese in fact contributed to the worldwide “internationalist imagination” of the twentieth century, if at times with disastrous results.

Not surprisingly, the historiographies of Japan and the world during the savage twentieth century are dominated by periodizations based on war, most notably the world wars and the Cold War. The story of Imperial Japan typically highlights the short, successful campaigns against China (1894-95) and Russia (1904-05) and to a lesser extent World War I. But the great conflagration at mid-century, whether it starts in 1931, 1937, or 1941, looms large over interpretations of nearly everything that came before in modern Japanese history as historians have tried to find its causes and repercussions. One school of thought, exemplified by Ienaga Saburo in *The Pacific War* (1968), places the blame on a repressive Meiji state, and therefore emphasizes continuity over time. However, as Abel implies, the dominant interpretation sees the 1930s and 1940s as a dark valley into which the Japanese descended. It is relatively straightforward to see such a break from the past in the offi-

cial expectations for Japanese soldiers. For example, the atrocities committed in the Fifteen Year War flew in the face of the imperial admonitions of the Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors (1882), which instruct military men to avoid, among other things, gratuitous violence in battle, lest they be hated like a tiger or a wolf.<sup>[1]</sup> The dark-valley framework also contains debates over stickier issues, such as the complicity of ordinary subjects in the war effort or, in other words, to what extent the people were being deceived by a militaristic regime or acting as enthusiastic participants. As sophisticated as that debate has become, a degree of determinism is embedded in it, in that studies imply that historical actors were aware of the consequences that their policies or support would have on the subsequent course of events.

Abel's accent on transwar internationalism further refines our understanding of the dark valley and by extension the histories of modern Japan and international relations in the mid-twentieth century. On one level, she demonstrates that for Japan the 1930s and early 1940s were neither a continuation of a negative flow of events rushing headlong into war nor a complete break with a more positive immediate past and future, at least in terms of internationalist rhetoric, aspirations, and to a lesser extent actions. The typical binary that sees the 1920s as internationalist and the 1930s as isolationist and warlike misses the innate link between internationalism and nationalism for all nations and the virtual absence of any calls for isolationism in transwar Japan. The real dynamic of 1930s Japan, she rightly argues, was not a case of committed internationalists either fighting an opposing tide of imperialism or jumping on a pan-Asianist bandwagon (p. 15). Rather, groups across the Japanese political spectrum renegotiated and reinvented internationalism to accommodate the exigencies of war and imperialism, and the process again played out in the postwar period in making room for peace (p. 14).

Here, in other words, Abel's analysis allows us to see more clearly how decisions were made in real time, rather than in retrospect. Framing the dynamics of the war years as a choice between caving in to the inevitable rise of imperialism and riding a pan-Asianist wave assumes that, like us, Japanese internationalists knew what was to come as their many potential futures gave way to a single present. Unlike the typical emphases on complicity and hypocrisy behind Japanese policies, Abel highlights how lofty ideas that went horribly awry in one time could still enjoy a high level of enthusiasm in another. Thus, on a second, related level, she restores the importance of contingency to decision making. Her approach also

exposes how foreign observers over time have simplistically attributed intentions to Japanese officials that they simply did not have. For example, a 1938 article in the *New York Times* saw Japanese militarists as the culprits behind the cancellation of the Tokyo Olympics that were to be held in 1940, supposing they feared that the positivity created between nations at the Games would wreck Japan's own carefully cultivated spirit of nationalism. In fact, as Abel shows, most Japanese at the time did not believe that the internationalism of the Olympics was incompatible with the rising ultranationalism in their own country or expansion of their empire (p. 139).

On a more technical note, a major strength of the book is that Abel delivers precisely what she promises in regards to content. In a comprehensive introduction, she lays out two interconnected themes of the book that show how ideas, rhetoric, and perceptions matter to real policy decision making. As noted, one main theme explores the evolution and ubiquity of internationalist activities as they were adapted to changing circumstances and national goals. Like Akira Iriye's *Power and Culture* (1981) and more recent works, she accepts 1919 as a turning point, affirming that after the Paris Peace Conference and creation of the League of Nations, Wilsonianism was the central framework of international relations for Japan and the other victorious powers. In addition, Abel advances the insights of works such as Iriye (1981) and Thomas Burkman's *Japan and the League of Nations* (2008) by not only stressing the vibrancy of Japanese internationalism into the 1930s and 1940s. Her transwar focus also reveals the continuities between, for example, the planning for the Tokyo Olympics of 1940 and 1964 and the rhetoric of the Greater East Asia Conference of 1943 and Bandung Conference of 1955. The second theme analyzes the persistent Japanese apprehension over foreign perceptions of Japan and its place in global affairs. In short, Japan's rise beginning in the late nineteenth century in a racist world order made its status among the powers uncertain. Abel argues that this uncertainty created a constant fear of international isolation within the Japanese foreign policy establishment, and this fear intensified as Japanese participation in the international community grew more important, especially in times of crisis, such as when Japan left the League in 1933 and surrendered in 1945. Relatedly, she notes the pressure that Japanese officials over time have put on subjects and citizens to shape up, so as not to embarrass the nation when the world has come to visit, such as during the Olympic Games in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

While the clarity of Abel's analytical parameters de-

serves high praise, a closer look at Japanese domestic political dynamics shows that the aspirations and anxieties of policymakers and pundits were in fact more long-standing and expedient than she acknowledges. There is no question that Japanese of the imperial era (1868-1945)—and beyond—routinely expressed concern over the tenuousness of Japan's status in world affairs. However, this concern, while often truly felt, was a tool used by competitors for political power and rhetorical authority within Japan to promote specific interests and ideas of how Japanese diplomacy and society should and should not be. An underlying assumption, stemming from the promises of the Meiji Restoration of 1868, was that Japan would have a prominent place in world affairs. In this regard, the foundational binary at work was not Japan versus the West, but Meiji versus Tokugawa, which at least in part accounts for the constant calls for a "second restoration" that also run through Meiji, Taisho, and Showa rhetoric. In other words, just as Abel underscores how various groups exploited internationalist structures for divergent ends, Japanese political actors deployed the alleged sins of the Tokugawa shogunate—usurpation of imperial rule, social stratification, and international isolation—against the policy proposals of their political rivals at home. What is more, as Sheldon Garon in *Molding Japanese Minds* (1998) shows, using an event such as the Olympics to push Japanese society in a certain direction was a well-established practice before the 1930s.

Key patterns that Abel emphasizes in Japanese foreign policy also began before the transwar era. For example, her analysis of the planning for the proposed 1940 Tokyo Olympics argues that far from forsaking Wilsonian internationalism, Japanese internationalists of the 1930s in fact turned towards people's diplomacy and cultural exchange as tools of international engagement. A basic belief of Olympic people's diplomacy was "that tensions with the Western powers stemmed from their ignorance of Japan, and that, therefore, fostering greater understanding would improve relations" (p. 113). While her accent on the continuities of the 1930s is well taken, Abel, like most scholars of imperial Japan, accepts 1919 as a historical watershed or the point at which Japanese embraced Wilsonianism. But as suggested above, a binary pitting representative government against arbitrary power had long existed in Japanese political rhetoric, which is a major reason why Wilson's words resonated in Japan after the First World War.

More problematically, depicting Wilsonianism as the benchmark of positive internationalism obscures both its arbitrary aspects in practice and the common ground

that Japanese believed they shared with Europeans and Americans. On the one hand, while his calls for a world made safe for democracy were sincere, Woodrow Wilson saw no contraction in perpetuating racial segregation in the postwar new world order. This rejection certainly upset Japanese across the political spectrum. On the other hand, however, it did not upset Japanese faith in cooperative diplomacy and commonalities with the West, which were homegrown and not contingent on US and European actions. As Asada Sadao in *Ryotaisenkan no Nichi-Bei Kankei* (1993) and others show, the Foreign Ministry and private subjects since at least the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05 engaged in official and semi-official education campaigns abroad to show foreigners that Japanese were like them and that international discord was a product of misunderstanding that could be mended by closer cross-cultural contact.

In addition to downplaying some of the continuities that Showa Japanese shared with their late nineteenth- and earlier twentieth-century counterparts, the book's singular focus on Japan does not allow us to see how Japanese concerns might have been transnational in scope. For example, in assessing the 1964 Tokyo Olympics in tandem with the cancelled 1940 Games, Abel argues that seeing the "two moments together helps to identify elements of Japan's foreign policy that are not tied to war or peace, but rather have more lasting significance" (p. 142). While this is an excellent point, it is not clear to what extent Japanese efforts to exploit the 1964 Olympics in order to project a new and improved image to the world were indeed "echoes of the 1930s" as she claims or a tool that other nations have used towards similar ends. In fairness, Abel could not have been more precise in laying out her analytical framework, and such a comparison might have been beyond the scope of her study. But it would be interesting to see how the Japanese experience was similar to and different from other ones, especially given her contention that the pattern of "hijacking an ostensibly apolitical international event to change and strengthen Japan's diplomatic relations" has continued into the twenty-first century (p. 247).

On a final note, determining precisely where their nation fits into a world defined by exclusive categories has long been a dilemma for Japanese. Studies in the aggregate show how Japanese officials as well as private subjects and citizens have consistently hedged their bets in navigating constructed bipolar worlds since the mid-nineteenth century or so. In other words, Japanese over time have sought to convince Americans, Europeans,

Asians, and others of their similarities, despite placing a concurrent accent on Japanese uniqueness. Whereas existing scholarship tends to stress Japanese differences, Abel adds to our understanding of commonalities, particularly by showing the similarities between the Greater East Asia Declaration and Atlantic Charter during the Second World War and Japanese efforts to bridge the new East-West divide during the Cold War. Given this and the

contributions outlined above, *The International Minimum* is a welcome addition to our understanding of global history through Japanese lenses over the past century.

Note

[1]. Tadayoshi Sakurai, *Human Bullets: A Soldier's Story of the Russo-Japanese War* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999 [1907]), 265.

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**Citation:** Robert G. Kane. Review of Abel, Jessamyn R., *The International Minimum: Creativity and Contradiction in Japan's Global Engagement, 1933-1964*. H-Japan, H-Net Reviews. January, 2016.

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