
“WHAT IF THE JAPANESE COULD ALTER
WW₂? – A CASE STUDY OF
KAWAGUCHI’S MANGA SERIES

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To the general public abroad, Japanese manga may seem a type of graphic narratives that excel in escapist, fantastic stories, and consequently to be less rooted in factual history or in contemporary daily life. While Kaiji Kawaguchi's *Jipangu* (translated as *Zipang* in English and French) contains a certain amount of fantastic aspects, it is, on the whole, rather serious and "naturalistic," because it not only uses the Second World War as its detailed setting, but also because it questions in an explicit way postwar Japan's coping with the wartime period. The author establishes this link between contemporary times and the wartime past by having a 21st century Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF)-vessel transported, in an unexplained but seemingly natural way, to the Pacific in 1942. Once the ship arrives in this historical context, the crew faces many dilemmas, such as how to save as many Japanese as possible without hurting any Americans, their 21st century Allies.

Gradually and inevitably, the narrative diverges from the historical record, leading after almost 9,000 pages to a different outcome of the Second World War. A quite different postwar Japan emerges, but one that is not necessarily better or worse than the actual Japan we know. Therefore, the series can be considered as an example of the alternate history genre, but one in which effort has been put into making it as plausible as possible. The focus in this manga series lies precisely on the continuing debate (especially among the 21st century crew) about what course the changes to history should take and how the 21st century crew should or should not interfere with the historical past. Consequently, the sensitive issues in the manga series have relevance in today's controversy about Japan's role in the international context and Japan's supposedly inadequate addressing of the past.

The series *Jipangu* started in 2000 in the popular Kodansha manga magazine *Weekly Morning*, with an average weekly circulation of 400,000 to 450,000 copies.¹ Readers were taken on a fantastic journey that, with a weekly rhythm, would last for more than nine years, traced in 442 weekly episodes of about twenty or twenty-two pages each. Like other popular manga series, the weekly installments were collected in tankoubon volumes of some two hundred pages, consisting of eleven chapters or weekly episodes each.² By 2010, some fifteen million copies had been sold in Japan.³

¹ Maxey 2012, 3.

² Since I cannot read Japanese, this analysis will be based on the complete French translation of the forty-three tankoubon volumes. References to the French edition are made as follows: the number of the volume in Roman numerals followed by page number.

³ Maxey 2012, 3.



Zipang has to date attracted only limited academic attention; the main exceptions are the studies published by myself and historian Trent Maxey.⁴ Of course, the fact that the complete series is not widely translated may explain this lack of critical attention. Nevertheless, as I will try to argue, there are good and urgent reasons to consider this series in more detail because it inhabits a somewhat particular place both in the genre of alternate histories and in the contemporary debate about Japan's military. Before going into more detail about the narrative and its possible political meanings, it is important to briefly sketch the broader context in which the narratives are situated, more precisely the genre of alternate history and the specific Japanese historical background. Both aspects are crucial for a better understanding of this manga.⁵

THE GENRE OF ALTERNATE HISTORY

Various genre labels like war story or time travel can be applied to *Zipang*, because it contains a mixture of various genre aspects (war, SF, thriller, spy story, historical fiction), but for the purpose of this article, I will focus primarily on its alternate history aspects. Stories with changed historical pasts are usually called alternate histories, or “uchronia” (meaning “in no time”), “allohistory” (other history), or “what if-stories.” This kind of historical speculation has a long tradition. Already in ancient Greece, the historian Herodotus speculated about the possible consequences that would arise if the Persians had defeated the Greeks at Marathon. Gavriel Rosenfeld, one of the first scholars to write a critical piece about the genre, acknowledges:

Ever since antiquity, the posing of counterfactual questions has constituted an implicit, if underacknowledged, component of historical thought, helping historians establish causal connections and draw moral conclusions in interpreting the past. Yet, with the rise of modern “scientific” historiography in the nineteenth century, allohistorical reasoning became stigmatized as empirically unverifiable and was banished to the realm of lighthearted cocktail party conversations and parlor games. As a result, alternate history slowly migrated to the field of imaginative literature.⁶

⁴ Lefèvre 2009; Maxey 2012.

⁵ I thank Martin Lund, Leena Romu and Katja Kontturi of Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art and two anonymous reviewers for their useful comments, criticisms, and suggestions.

⁶ Rosenfeld 2005, 5.



Literary critic Karen Hellekson notes that writer Murray Leinster's *Sidewise in Time* (1934) is generally recognized as the first alternate history in genre SF.⁷ After the Second World War the marginalized genre of alternate history gained both in popularity and respectability (including growing critical attention), but its real explosion as a mainstream literary genre dates only to the 1990s. Alternate histories can be found in Japanese fiction from the 1960s on, but it was only in the 1980s that the Asia-Pacific War became a topical focus.⁸

Moreover, the genre of alternate history extends far beyond written prose: there are also alternate history films, games, websites, and examples from numerous other media. Alternate histories have been written as spy thrillers and fictional autobiographies, mysteries, and historical novels. Alongside these works of fiction, there is also a branch of historical scholarship that uses what if-hypotheses. Such counterfactual history is promoted and practiced by military historians such as Niall Ferguson or Robert Cowley.⁹ In contrast to most historians, who do not accept thought experiments as appropriate tools for historical research, various philosophers of history have argued that counterfactuals are a legitimate part of the most serious historical studies.¹⁰ Through counterfactuals, historians can investigate responsibility, historical causes, and discover the importance of key events, says Johannes Bulhof.¹¹ Alternate history scholar Matthew Schneider-Mayerson remarks that, although the alternate history is undoubtedly a genre, it defies easy categorization.¹²

Furthermore, one has to ask how the genre of alternate history relates to neighboring genres such as historical fiction, revisionist history, and SF. The definition of any generic label remains highly problematic, and I do not here have the ambition to go into detail about every label and discuss all the possible variations and nuances, or the historical evolution of every genre. Rather, I am concerned with the most remarkable differences and similarities regarding the assumed roles of the creator and the reader, and the assumed status of events. The following comparative table

⁷ Hellekson 2009, 454.

⁸ Maxey 2012, 1. On p. 2 Maxey notes that he believes that "imaginary war chronicles offered their audiences an escape from both, providing a fictional past free of pacifist constraints and the recriminations of victims."

⁹ Cowley 2001.

¹⁰ Bulhof 1999; De Mey & Weber 2003; Nolan 2013.

¹¹ Bulhof 1999, 168.

¹² Schneider-Mayerson 2009, 71.



(table 1) does not describe all the possible variations within a genre, but rather focuses on what is generally considered its prototypical core or main tendency.¹³ Therefore, these general assumptions should not to be taken as normative or definitive. Moreover, there remains a difference between these assumptions (implicitly or explicitly made by the creator, be it an author or film director or publisher) and how readers in practice will deal with these assumptions.

TABLE 1: COMPARISON OF VARIOUS GENRES

	Historical fiction (of the past)	Revisionist history (of the past)	Alternate history (of the past)	SF (of the future)
Assumed role of the creator	primarily inventing, but with historical knowledge	historian	primarily inventing, but with historical knowledge	primarily inventing
Assumed digression from accepted history	few or minor	often major	often many and major	(not applicable)
Assumed status of events	mix of fiction and fact, but fiction is dominant	facts	mix of fiction and fact, but fiction is dominant	fiction

In fact, most fiction, historical fiction included, could be considered as partly alternate, in the sense that most stories locate some fictive events in a past that is largely historically correct. All kinds of complex relations between facts and fiction can be woven.¹⁴ The difference is that the events in so-called historical fiction in principle do not significantly alter the historical course of events. In contrast, alternate histories concern fictive events that supposedly have quite fundamentally changed the course of history as we know it – for instance by giving another outcome to a crucial battle. Though the narrative of an alternative history presents itself seemingly as some kind of real history, both writer and reader are well aware that it is basically fiction.

¹³ Table 1 is partly inspired by the categorization in Roscoe and Hight 2001, 54.

¹⁴ Ryan 2006.



To find out how audiences perceived media realism, and if their conceptualizations of realism comported with or differed from those that had been developed by researchers, communications scholar Alice Hall interviewed forty-seven young adults in a focus group setting.¹⁵ The participants had to discuss the degree of realism in several films and TV programs and came up with six distinct means of evaluation of the reality of media texts:

1. plausibility of the events or behaviors portrayed,
2. typicality, “the type or range of people whom the media portrayal resembled,”¹⁶
3. factuality, accurate representation of a specific, real-world event or person,
4. emotional involvement, the potential to become involved with or to relate to the characters,
5. narrative consistency (internally coherent story),
6. perceptual persuasiveness, the degree to which a compelling visual illusion is created.

Hall found that “different realism conceptualizations tended to be used for different media genres and the conceptualizations tended to focus on different features of the evaluated text.”¹⁷

Unfortunately no similar studies specifically concerning graphic narratives are available, but I will use the categories of Hall to discuss the tactics of *Zipang*. It is clear that various of these means (like narrative consistency) are played out to various degrees in the series. In contrast to the striking schematizations and deformations in many other manga, Kawaguchi and his assistants have taken great care in making the drawn pictures look quite naturalistic (in sense that comics historian Joseph Witek has defined naturalistic visual style¹⁸) and thus underpinning perceptual persuasiveness.

Furthermore, the authors have used a lot of historical reference material (factuality argument). First of all, a large number of appendices are added in the tankoubon editions, which helps readers to contextualize the alterations introduced in the story. The detailed timelines that compare historical events with events in the narrative are meant to educate readers in the actual

¹⁵ Hall 2003.

¹⁶ Hall 2003, 632.

¹⁷ Hall 2003, 624. These findings were later confirmed by Cho et al. 2014.

¹⁸ Witek 2012, 32, explains that the naturalistic visual style derives from the conventions of realism in the visual arts and particularly in photography, but that its narrative techniques are closely connected to those of cinema: “The spatial depth created by the use of perspective is available for the movement of characters, who may be seen from a variety of angles and at varying visual distances. Figures likewise remain stable as physical entities, with any changes in shape and size accounted for by the familiar conventions of visual distance and perspective.”



history of WW2.¹⁹ Secondly, in the narrative itself, the vessels and the backgrounds are on the whole historically correct, and widely known historical figures are featured, including Adolf Hitler, Mao Zedong, and various Japanese figures such as fleet admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, general Kanji Ishiwara, or politician Mitsumasa Yonai. When Kawaguchi includes such historical figures, he tries to stay as closely as possible to their historical behavior and political stance (typicality argument). There is thus an interesting mix of real world figures and fictive characters in this alternate history. In this mixture of historical realism and proper imagination, some fictional events may be less believable, but from the moment the reader accepts the fantastic premise of time travel, the story appears as quite plausible.

It also is crucial, as philosopher Kathleen Singles stresses, that the reader of alternate history can contrast the narrated events with his or her historical knowledge of real past events.²⁰ After all, both the reader and the creator remain well aware that it is purely fiction. This is an important point of difference from revisionist history. In the case of revisionist history, a historian or would-be historian tries to change generally accepted historical knowledge, either through methodologically sound research or through distortions of historical records. In both cases historians present their reasoning as fact, not as fiction.

Although alternate histories are often discussed in SF encyclopedias or companions such as those edited by writer and literary critic David Pringle or literary and cultural critic Mark Bould and colleagues, not every alternate history incorporates prototypical SF-elements.²¹ Contrary to the widespread view of SF as a genre committed to the future, historian and literary critic Tom Shippey states that SF “can be also a literature which challenges history, decentering it, and rendering it critically contingent.”²² Nevertheless, media scholar Matt Hills acknowledges that

historiography and sf have themselves made variant uses of counterfactuals. For historians, it has been primarily deployed as a device to illuminate the actual historical contingencies and factors operating in and on “the past” as we culturally understand it, while sf has both

¹⁹ Maxey 2012, 5.

²⁰ Singles 2013, 8.

²¹ Pringle 1996; Bould et al. 2009.

²² Shippey 1981, 26; Hill 2009, 438.



developed this aim and used counterfactuals for purposes of melodrama and narrative experimentation.²³

While *Zipang* is constructed as a fictional narrative instead of a historical reasoning, it basically stands much closer to a historiographical approach than to the typical approach in science fiction described in the Hills quote. The density of historical information surrounding the manga is, according to Maxey, “as important as the alterations to history, giving it attributes of a realist historical novel.”²⁴ It is crucial to understand the ambivalence of historical discourse. Historian Tessa Morris-Suzuki explains that since as early as the 19th century, historians and philosophers have debated “the contentious connection between the infinitely complex lived experience of history itself and the stories that we tell about that experience.”²⁵

Alternate histories are also different from science fiction about future events, because in the latter case future events, which have not yet taken place at the time of writing, are staged.²⁶ So there can be no comparison with events that we already know about, but fictional events in the future may refer to the reader’s own time or to the historical past.

Schneider-Mayerson sees two general features as the bedrock of alternate history: first its emphasis on military and physical force as the prime movers of history (which is true to a certain extent also for *Zipang*) and, secondly, a deep-seated distrust of centralized government.²⁷ This second feature is less present in *Zipang*, where the possibility of democratic government is not excluded, but presented as something difficult to realize in practice: in the alternate postwar Japan of *Zipang*, the new government has not succeeded in building a perfect democracy.

²³ Hills 2009, 434.

²⁴ Maxey 2012, 5.

²⁵ Morris-Suzuki 2005, 20.

²⁶ I do not here include sub-genres like steampunk (for a discussion of this genre see Guffey and Lemay, 2014).

²⁷ Schneider-Mayerson 2009, 72.



JAPANESE CONTEXT AND CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS OF WW2

The cultural and political context in which *Zipang* has been both created and read is also quite crucial for a good understanding of its alternate history. As one of the defeated Axis nations of WW2, Japan has a peculiar and ambiguous stance on war. The introduction of the Constitution of Japan, written by the Americans and approved by the Japanese parliament in 1947, consecrated a spirit of ultimate non-violence. Article 9 explicitly renounced war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes. The clause also stated that land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war-making potential, would never be maintained. Despite these constitutionally formulated war-renouncing and peaceful aims, Japan has, in fact, turned from a shattered, occupied, and disarmed country after WW2 into one of the world's strongest military powers.²⁸ In September 2014 a groundbreaking reinterpretation of Article 9, proposed by Prime Minister Shinzō Abe and his government, was approved by the Diet, which circumvented the constitutional amendment procedure: the SDF is now permitted to deploy in acts of collective self-defense (generally understood to be the right to use force to repel an armed attack against a foreign country that has a close relationship with one's own country).²⁹ There were many public protests, as for instance when constitutional scholars from every respected Japanese university put out a declaration condemning the bill as unconstitutional.

Postwar Japan has also had to deal with representation of the lost war, and, as sociologists Akiko Hashimoto explains: "Narrating war history in a defeated nation is a complicated, painful project. [...] it is part of a long process of repairing the moral backbone of a broken society after a monumental national fall."³⁰ Although postwar Japanese culture has nurtured a strong popular yearning for peace and an aversion to war,³¹ Japan's media and public opinion have, after the collapse of the Cold War system, increasingly supported a new policy of active national security that is eroding domestic anti-militaristic principles.³² Several authors have argued that there is an

²⁸ Lind 2003, 39; Hughes 2009.

²⁹ Choong 2015, 173.

³⁰ Hashimoto 2015.

³¹ The few war manga of the 1950s all had an anti-war bent (largely due to American censorship). From the early 1960s on, pro-war views began to creep back into the media and manga, while others responded to this new trend with an anti-war viewpoint (eg. Nakazawa's *Hadashi no Gen / Barefoot Gen*). See Thompson 2007, 217.

³² Shinoda 2007; Hughes 2009.



increasing pro-military slant in Japanese education.³³ For political scientist Tsuneo Akaha this shift is a result of three factors: first, the changing nature of the US–Japan alliance into an organization for regional and global stability; second, the political need to transform Japan into a “normal state”; third, concerns about the military built up in North Korea and China.³⁴ A comparative study of the patterns of war reconciliation in Japan and Germany showed that, as opposed to its former Axis ally, Japan has failed to reconcile with its former victim nations.³⁵ Today, Japanese accounts of war memories are diverse and divisive.³⁶

Unfortunately, there is no academic consensus on the modalities of the effects of cultural representations. Various theorists of the social field may claim that representations influence the way people perceive reality or history, but establishing such a causal relation is still hazardous, because it remains extremely difficult to isolate only one factor and empirically test its possible effects.³⁷ Concerning the comics medium, Morris-Suzuki assumes particularly strong effects:

Their stark, dramatic images also have the power to burn themselves into our memories, influencing the way in which we see the present and re-member the past.³⁸

[T]he comic drawing’s stark outlines and exaggerated features imprint themselves on our minds in the way that simple shapes imprint themselves on the mind of an infant.³⁹

Recent experimental aesthetics research emphasizes that the sensory, perceptual, and cognitive processes that underlie experiences with art works are “driven by a complex interaction among characteristics of the art object, the viewer, and the physical, social, and historical contexts in which the experience takes place.”⁴⁰ In our case, the experience of the same manga can be quite diverse for readers in different contexts.

³³ Eg. Saburo 1993; Jeans 2005; Gibson 2011; Sand 2016.

³⁴ Akaha 2005, 15–16.

³⁵ Hein 2010.

³⁶ Hashimoto 2015; Seaton 2007, 7.

³⁷ E.g. Raudsepp 2005, Jodelet 1989, Barker 2002, Morris-Suzuki 2005, Bukh 2016.

³⁸ Morris Suzuki 2005, 164.

³⁹ Morris Suzuki 2005, 182.

⁴⁰ Locher 2011, 697.



Moreover, our visions of history are drawn from diverse sources, a kaleidoscopic mass of fragments: not only history books, but also historical novels, photographs, exhibitions, oral tradition, comics, the Internet, and numerous other sources.⁴¹ Furthermore all these sources do not necessarily form a coherent whole or message. In his study of history in contemporary popular culture, literary historian Jerome de Groot points out that discourses of pastness are various, multiple, multifaceted, unstable, and possibly contradictory.⁴²

Scholarly opinions differ on how to interpret the interaction between politics and culture in Japan, especially in relation to politically sensitive themes like WW2 and the military. On the one hand, there are scholars like political scientist Naoko Shimazu, who claim that representations of the past in postwar Japan have tended to reflect the conservative political environment.⁴³ By assuming the role of victim, the Japanese could disregard the uncomfortable truth “that they were also aggressors, whose victims in Asia and elsewhere still demand an apology and compensation.” Popular works in a number of media (such as *Eien no Zero*⁴⁴) that use fictional narratives of the nation’s wartime history are often branded as rightist or nationalistic.⁴⁵ However, on the contrary, historian Matthew Penney believes that many Japanese WWII narratives manifest important anti-war, anti-militarist themes: an example is the lengthy manga series *Hadashi no Gen (Barefoot Gen)*, Keiji Nakazawa, 1973–87), about the bombing of Hiroshima and its terrible consequences.⁴⁶ The manga also sheds a critical light on some dark elements of Japanese history, like the maltreatment of Korean workers during the war. Since the historical events are mostly viewed from the perspective of an innocent child who is physically, mentally, and socially heavily affected by the bomb, the reader is quickly swept up in his unfair fate.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Morris-Suzuki 2005, 2.

⁴² de Groot 2009, 4, 248-249.

⁴³ Shimazu 2003, 115–116.

⁴⁴ *Eien no zero (The Eternal Zero)* was originally a novel by Naoki Hyakuta (2006), but it has also been adapted as a manga (Naoki Hyakuta and Sōichi Sumoto 2010–2012) and as a live action movie (Takashi Yamazaki, 2013). The narrative starts with two grandchildren wondering if their grandfather, a kamikaze pilot, should be regarded as similar to the terrorists of 9/11. They start interviewing people who knew their grandfather and eventually learn the real (and comforting) truth about him.

⁴⁵ US Naval Institute Staff, 2014.

⁴⁶ Penney 2007.

⁴⁷ Lefèvre 2010.



Japanologist Roman Rosenbaum also claims that revisionist works are contested by powerful counter-narratives in Japan.⁴⁸ Many works have indeed openly challenged the “victim’s history” view and the government silences on the darker aspects of the country’s wartime past, particularly by presenting Japanese atrocities.⁴⁹ Moreover, many such works have been met with financial and critical success.⁵⁰ In this vein, comparative literature scholar King-fai Tam and colleagues contend that Japan has

a striving, cacophonous and competitive postwar culture in which arguments continue to rage about the meanings of the war. [...] In countless battle histories, memoirs, ceremonies, exhibitions, comics, reports by investigative journalists, television dramas, anime productions and feature movies, one finds, alongside regret for and criticism of war, accounts of heroic combat, elegies for doomed missions, first-person blood and guts recollections of battle, accusatory laments for massive civilian deaths for which both the Allies and the Japanese authorities are blamed, and defeat-defying affirmations of the Japanese moral fibre.⁵¹

So, Japanese culture in relation to the Second World War may be more diverse than often thought outside Japan.

ZIPANG, AN ALTERNATE HISTORY

Kaiji Kawaguchi (born 1948) began creating manga in the mid 1970s. His most famous series is *Chinmoku no Kantai* (Silent Service, 1988-1996), a military-political series related to the debates about Japan’s role in a contemporary geopolitical context. Since this manga and its anime

⁴⁸ Rosenbaum 2013, 8.

⁴⁹ E.g. Junpei Gomikawa’s novel *Ningen no joken* (The Human Condition, 1958), about the Japanese occupation of China, which was adapted into a movie trilogy (Masaki Kobayashi 1959-61) and twice into manga (by Kenji Abe in 1971 and by Shotaro Ishinomori in 1988).

⁵⁰ Penney 2007.

⁵¹ Tam et al. 2015, 5.



adaptation have been already widely discussed, I will not further discuss this series, but immediately focus on *Zipang*.⁵²

As already noted, *Zipang*'s narrative involves time travel, which has been used in hundreds of SF narratives. *Zipang* itself briefly alludes to classic time travel stories, like H. G. Wells' *Time Machine* (III:95, IX:59) or *The Flying Dutchman* (XIV:99). But the beginning of *Zipang* is also reminiscent of Ryo Hanmura's novel *Sengoku jieitai* (*Time Slip*, 1974) or its movie adaptation (Kosei Saito 1979), wherein a unit of SDF infantry find itself transported four centuries back in time. There is also the famous American movie *The Final Countdown* (Don Taylor 1980), where an American aircraft carrier is transported to the moment right before Pearl Harbor. In *Zipang*, a 21st century Maritime Self-Defense Force (SDF) ship is transported back in time to June 1942 during a heavy, appearing just before the crucial battle of Midway between Japan and the US. Starting with the intrusion of the 21st century vessel in the midst of the Pacific war, a counterfactual history of Japan gradually takes shape: at the end of *Zipang*, Japan avoids surrender and successfully reaches a peace agreement with the Allied Forces. Unlike in *The Final Countdown*, *Zipang*'s 21st century crew and its ship cannot return to their own time. Almost the entire crew dies, and their technologically advanced ship is sunk.

The author of *Zipang* may also have been inspired by the alternate Japanese history of *Konpeki no Kantai* (originally a novel by Yoshio Aramaki, later also adapted in manga, anime, and a game). In that counterfactual history, we see a technologically advanced Imperial Japanese Navy and a radically different World War II.

Given the historical context sketched above, it is interesting to consider the reaction of the 21st century Japanese crew when they find themselves in the turmoil of a World War, sixty years in their own past. As popular media have the potential to give us access to a diverse range of perspectives,⁵³ *Zipang* allows quite contrasting opinions and arguments to be uttered by various characters, but a dominant point of view seems lacking.⁵⁴ This corresponds with the ideas of philosopher Laurent Gervereau, who calls a war a "plurifocal" phenomenon (one having many

⁵² See for example Schodt 1996, 164-168; Kinsella 2000, 86-87; Napier 2005, Mizuno 2007.

⁵³ Morris-Suzuki 2005, 29-30.

⁵⁴ Kawaguchi had more or less the same strategy for his *Chinmoku no Kantai* series, as Kinsella (2000, 87) explains: "While accused in 1990 of supporting the ideas of Right-wing military groups, Silent Service in fact reflected the experimental fusion of left-wing and right-wing ideas and symbols in a new political era."



possible perspectives), meaning that there is not one right image of a war; every war should be regarded from diverse and complementary viewpoints.⁵⁵

Zipang's main hero, Yosuke Kadomatsu, the second in command of the vessel, clearly dissociates himself from Imperial Japan, when he deplores all the lives lost in the war as a result of a "strategy thought up by arrogant, pretentious people" (I:90). The militarist war government of Hideki Tōjō is thus regarded as very bad. Nevertheless, there are nuances; other former prime ministers such as Fumimaro Konoe and Mitsumasa Yonai come out as ethically better – at least from a postwar perspective.⁵⁶ Maxey, in his analysis of the series, stresses that the character of Kadomatsu ensures that the ideals of the SDF have a masculine champion.⁵⁷ The series' image of the SDF remains ambivalent, just as it does in the real world: on the one hand, SDF stands for pacifism and humanitarianism, and on the other hand, it is a military force.

The other crucial character is the Imperial officer Kusaka, who is rescued from drowning by Kadomatsu. Kusaka often takes on an antagonistic role. He learns about Japan's fate in the war and decides to change the course of history as we know it. He resents the way postwar Japan has been shaped, critiquing for instance the fact that Japan can only have a Self-Defense Force rather than a real army. He ridicules the crew of the 21st century SDF (VIII:47):

You don't protect sovereignty or the people. You're nothing but pawns for the interests of the United States. SDF... what are you, really? The reasons for your existence are nothing but lies: you're simply an army that wags its tail for other countries.⁵⁸

What this fictive wartime officer says is thus more in tune with what is an increasingly common belief in contemporary Japan. Political scientist Christopher W. Hughes claims that Japanese society nowadays seems to be more tolerant of military and patriotic education and to the use of

⁵⁵ Gervereau 2003, 85.

⁵⁶ For example, Fumimaro Konoe is willing to undermine the militarist government (XXXI:97).

⁵⁷ Maxey 2012, 9-10.

⁵⁸ The French translation of the Japanese text reads: "Vous ne protégez ni la souveraineté, ni le peuple. Vous n'êtes que des pions servant les intérêts des États-Unis/ La force d'autodéfense... qui êtes-vous, finalement ? Les raisons de votre existence ne sont que mensonges : vous n'êtes qu'une force armée qui remue la queue devant les autres pays..."



force for national security ends. Members of the SDF, however, are hesitant to wear their uniforms off-base.⁵⁹

Another political scientist, Ellis Krauss, supposes, without presenting any statistical data in support, that there is a demographic divide emerging between the postwar generation and the more nationalistic younger generations.⁶⁰ Furthermore, a revisionist, nationalistic agenda is being advanced by the powerful lobby group Nippon Kaigi, according to *The Economist* (June 6, 2015). So, the character Kusaka in *Zipang* may express opinions that sit well with these revisionist tendencies in Japan, but Kawaguchi presents Kusaka as antagonistic to the interest of the protagonists, the 21st century crew. Nonetheless, Kusaka may be an attractive, powerful character for readers: he is dauntless in trying to realize his grand objective of founding “Jipangu,” an undefeated Japan different from the one we know. As Maxey stresses, the chasm separating the postwar Japanese from the prewar Japanese in the manga is the fundamental experience of defeat.⁶¹ Since Kadomatsu and Kusaka differ very much in opinion about which course to take, they are trying to neutralize each other in the long course of the narrative. Kusaka, for instance, wants to use extreme devices like the atom bomb to change the course of the war.⁶² Nevertheless, in the end, under extreme physical and mental pressure, both characters come to agree that the number of casualties has to be reduced and that Japan should seek peace with the US, so as to be spared from bombardment and occupation by the US Armed Forces. Kusaka dies, or rather sacrifices himself, but he is able to convince Kadomatsu to pursue his grand objective of Jipangu.⁶³ Indeed Kadomatsu later succeeds in convincing the US government to seek peace with Japan. By consequence, in *Zipang* the war in the Pacific ends already in the autumn of 1944, and Japan can develop as an independent state with a new, more democratic government than it had during the war.

⁵⁹ Hughes 2009, 142; see also the ethnographic study by Frühstück 2007, 63.

⁶⁰ Krauss quoted in Hudson Teslik 2006; see for instance the testimony of Amamiya 2010.

⁶¹ Maxey 2012, 7-8.

⁶² In this alternate history Kusaka obtains enriched uranium from Nazi Europe and succeeds, with the help of a Japanese scientist, in assembling an atom bomb.

⁶³ A wounded Kusaka, clinging to the lifeboat where Kadomatsu is lying in, tries to convince Kadomatsu that the postwar world needs order and that he can never return to his Japan (XXXII:10-13,21-27). The final destruction of the *Mirai* later strengthens Kusaka’s statement (XXXII:145-167). Kusaka pleads that Kadomatsu let him go to the depths of the sea. For Kusaka, it is of utmost importance that Kadomatsu survives to fulfill their shared mission (XXX:62-74). This crucial plot twist is unfortunately neglected in the analysis by Maxey (2012).



In this, *Zipangu* differs somewhat from typical Anglophone alternate histories. In Anglophone contexts, Rosenfeld sees fantasy scenarios or nightmare scenarios as the norm:

Fantasy scenarios envision the alternate past as superior to the real past and thereby typically express a sense of dissatisfaction with the way things are today. Nightmare scenarios, by contrast, depict the alternate past as inferior to the real past and thus usually articulate a sense of contentment with the contemporary status quo. Allohistorical fantasies and nightmares, moreover, each have different political implications. Fantasies tend to be liberal, for by imagining a better alternate past, they see the present as wanting and thus implicitly support changing it. Nightmares, by contrast, tend to be conservative, for by portraying the alternate past in negative terms, they ratify the present as the best of all possible worlds and thereby discourage the need for change. To be sure, these particular psychological and political implications do not stand in a necessary or deterministic relationship to the two scenarios.⁶⁴

Conversely, *Zipang* results in neither a fantasy, nor a nightmare scenario. In *Zipang*, there are on the one hand several hundred thousands of casualties fewer in the Pacific War (e.g. no atom bombs are dropped on two Japanese cities) and Japan develops partially as an independent democratic society (XXXIII). The Japanese army is both reduced and modernized as a National Defense Military, not that different from the actual SDF (XXXIII:112). But on the other hand, the alternate postwar Japan is not presented as a utopian society (e.g. many of the militarist wartime government serve in the new government – here too, is a similarity with actual history). There are measures taken to rebuild the economy and to reform to a democratic society (as another leading Japanese, Kisaragi, tells Kadomatsu, XXXIII:129). However, one of the surviving officers of the 21st century crew, Kikuchi, considers the democratization process in the first ten years after the war to be insufficient:

The feeling of liberation, which was born after the war, is dissipating with the economic growth of the country. [...] The people see everything they have lost and the little they have won. They live with a feeling of dissatisfaction towards the peace... The strongest criticism comes from those who haven't experienced the front. They criticize the government, arguing that it should have continued the war. It is certain this Japan will not experience a growth as impressing as the Japan we've lived in. But... nobody knows (XXXIII:139–140).⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Rosenfeld 2002, 11.

⁶⁵ The French translation of the Japanese text reads: "Et le sentiment de libération né après la guerre se dissipe depuis dix ans au rythme des progrès économiques de ce pays. [...] Les gens voient tout ce qu'ils ont perdu et le peu qu'ils ont gagné. Ils vivent avec un sentiment d'insatisfaction envers la paix... Les critiques les plus dures viennent bien sur de ceux qui n'ont



In a way, this can be interpreted as a consolation for the contemporary reader: our real, contemporary Japan is not so bad after all. As Rosenfeld notes, alternate history is inherently presentist: “It explores the past less for its own sake than to utilize it instrumentally to comment upon the present.”⁶⁶

Maxey thinks that *Zipang* challenges its readers: “The very ambiguity of the causal relationship between war, defeat, and postwar success strikes at the core of Japanese ambivalences between remembering and forgetting, trauma and pride, responsibility and evasion.”⁶⁷ Although *Zipang* is a skillful demonstration of how a war manga may appeal to readers of different backgrounds, it is in the first place meant for Japanese readers, who may differ in opinion in regard to Japan’s experiences in WW2 and the nation’s position in the world today. Morris-Suzuki believes that our relationship with the past is not only forged through factual knowledge, but that it also involves imagination and empathy with the people of the past.⁶⁸ This is in line what *Zipang*’s author has stated in an interview:

Deep inside, I have a double sentiment: one that wants to repudiate the Japanese (of WW2), and another that wants to be proud of them. On the one hand, I think I should, through my drawings, bluntly show why the Japanese started this war, how they were wrong; on the other hand, I also want to be proud of them. However, even this last case, I cannot present them [...] without highlighting their bad sides. But I think many Japanese are probably like me, they have this dual feeling towards Japan, a sensitivity that is perhaps specific to the Japanese people (XXII:188).

On a larger scale, *Zipang* taps into a real vein of Japan’s remilitarization and new assertive military role, without being explicitly revisionist like other manga such as *Gomanism Sengen (My Arrogant Declaration)*, Yoshinori Kobayashi, 1995–2003) or *Manga Kenkanryu (Hating the Korean Wave)*, Yamano Sharin, 2005–2009). *Gomanism Sengen* exhibits a belligerent attitude towards the US and

pas connu le front. Ils critiquent le gouvernement, arguant que ce dernier aurait dû continuer la guerre. Il est certain que ce Japon-là ne connaîtra pas une croissance aussi impressionnante que celle vécue par le nôtre...”

⁶⁶ Rosenfeld 2002, 93.

⁶⁷ Maxey 2012, 8-9.

⁶⁸ Morris-Suzuki 2005, 22.



argues that there was no objective evidence that the Japanese committed war-crimes.⁶⁹ *Manga Kenkanryu* is, as its title immediately shows, a plain anti-Korean manga.⁷⁰

The contemporary context is important. The continued interest in WW2 stories in Japan is striking. Representations of the wartime past in Japanese popular culture and the war fantasy genre seem more important than ever.⁷¹ Consider the latest animated film by Hayao Miyazaki, *The Wind Rises* (2013), a fictionalized biopic about Jiro Horikoshi, the designer of some of the most famous Japanese fighter planes. Moreover, the Japanese military has been collaborating on various recent projects by Japanese film production companies, including the movie *Ore wa, kimi no tame ni koso shini ni iku* (*I Go To Die For You*, Taku Shinjo, 2007), about the kamikaze pilots of WW2. According to the *Telegraph's* Japan correspondent, Colin Joyce, the release of this film confirmed a growing nostalgia in Japan for its wartime generation.⁷²

In other cases, like the game *KanColle*, or the *Kantai Collection*, there is also a kind of desensitization to WW2 at work. In this free-to-play web game, with some three million registered players, World War II naval warships are depicted as cute girls, known as “Fleet girls,” that the player must build, repair, and deploy against an alien fleet. Akky Akimoto of *The Japan Times* reports that a South Korean paper has interpreted *KanColle* as evidence of a conservative political shift amongst young people in Japan. This is a view that Akimoto does not share; for him, *KanColle* is just an “incidental hit.”⁷³

Recently, the author of *Zipang* started *Kubo Ibuki* (*Aircraft Carrier Ibuki*), a new series published in *Big Comic*, about a contemporary conflict between China and Japan: China invades some Japanese islands (Senkaku, Yonaguni, and Ishigaki) and Japan, together with the US Navy, takes on the Chinese forces. Simultaneously, in the real world, the constitutional limitations on the deployment of the Self-Defense Force was reviewed in September 2014 by the Japanese parliament, which, over and against many public protests, circumvented the constitutional amendment procedure in doing so.

⁶⁹ Kinsella 2000, 87-89.

⁷⁰ See the nuanced analysis in Sakamoto and Allen 2007.

⁷¹ Penney 2007. See also Otmazgin & Suter 2016.

⁷² Joyce 2007.

⁷³ Akimoto 2014.



CONCLUSION

Two main conclusions can be drawn from the above analysis and contextualization of *Zipang*. The first important element to stress is that this manga, while offering an alternate history, makes a concerted effort to convince readers of its plausible and naturalist stance. Despite its fantastic or SF time travel premise and its thriller-like intrigue, the visual realism and the almost educational didacticism of the historical context makes the series adhere primarily to a realistic mode, rather than to a modernist or postmodernist approach. *Zipang* does not question its fictive reality; when other fictions with time travel (like H.G. Wells' *Time Machine*) are evoked by the characters, it is mainly to differentiate the "reality" of their world from those fictional worlds. Kawaguchi and his team use the various factors (plausibility, typicality, factuality, emotional involvement, narrative consistency, and perceptual persuasiveness) that contribute to perceived realism to lend an air of realism to their own alternate history.

Second, it has become clear that *Zipang* must also be read in the context of postwar Japan and recent debates about the reinterpretation of Article 9 of the Constitution, which has led to Japan partly abandoning the war-renouncing path imposed on the nation by its former American occupier. Still, the manga's constitutive moral ambiguity makes it suitable and attractive for readers with rather divergent political views. Especially through the character Kusakabe, the manga calls into question various achievements of the Japanese nation and the way it positions itself in international relations (especially towards the US). With its serious and nuanced tone about the war, *Zipang* differentiates itself not only from outspoken anti-war manga (like *Hadashi no Gen*), but also from explicit nationalist and revisionist propaganda manga (such as *Gomanism Sengen* or *Manga Kenkanryu*), and from completely fantastic and desensitizing approaches like the game *KanColle*. By blending real historical elements and counterfactual history, Kawaguchi delivers an interesting and intelligent debate about Japan's WW2 and its aftermath.



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