



Edgar A. Porter and Ran Ying Porter

Japanese Reflections on World War II and the American Occupation

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and the American Occupation

Asian History

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To those who agreed to sit for one, sometimes two, interviews, we cannot show our appreciation enough. Their names are found throughout the book and are listed alphabetically at the end. As we go to press, we know that some of those interviewed have passed away since we met them. We have tried to represent their views as accurately as possible and hope those still living, and those passed on, would find that to be the case.

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This book is dedicated to the members of our family who experienced the years covered in the following pages. In China, Ran Ying's mother, Ma Ji Sen, and aunt, Ma Ji Feng, saw the war up close and their observations and sacrifices are chronicled here. In the United States, Edgar's father, G. Ray Porter, served in the U.S. Army Air Corps during the war and his uncle, Grant Porter, fought with the U.S. Marines on Guadalcanal and Peleliu. Each of them also survived the war.

Introduction

The personal histories of those who experienced the war and Occupation in Japan between the early 1930s and mid-1950s will soon fade away as age takes its toll. With this in mind, the authors decided to chronicle as much of that oral history as possible and to accomplish this in as deep and, at the same time, broad an approach as possible. Deep in the sense that we dug into layers of memory from citizens living in one prefecture in Japan, a place that reflects in both drama and detail the national challenges and attitudes of the times; broad in the sense that we interviewed diverse populations of Japanese citizens encompassing ages and professions across the spectrum of society during the war years. These memories, enhanced by local newspapers and archives, introduce us to the people of Oita Prefecture as they struggled to survive a quarter century of hardship and chaos.

The idea for this book began with two separate but quickly merging interests. Soon after moving to Japan to teach in an international university in Beppu, a resort town of 120,000 citizens located in Oita Prefecture, Edgar discovered that following the close of World War II the United States established a regional Occupation headquarters in Beppu. In what is now Beppu Park, this headquarters remained active for almost ten years, from the end of World War II through the Korean War, as the primary U.S. presence for much of the island of Kyushu. The name of the base was “Camp Chickamauga,” after the Civil War battle fought in Edgar’s native state of Tennessee. Visits to the park, as well as the local library, brought forth information and materials to motivate a historian to dig deeper.

At the same time, Ran Ying was engaged as a volunteer at the Beppu Foreign Tourist Information Office, located in the center of town only a few blocks from the park. Her fellow volunteers were retired businessmen and teachers from the area, all of whom spoke English. Over dinner for several months Ran Ying would recount the stories these men and women shared with her about their lives during the war and Occupation. As these captivating stories kept coming, we began to see the richness of a more complete study and shifted our focus from that of the U.S. Occupation to one combining the daily life of those experiencing both the war and the Occupation as it had transpired in this coastal prefecture on Japan’s southeastern coast.

The motivation to pursue this research was driven by the opportunity to let people tell their own stories, with little overlay of hidden agenda from the two of us. We knew this to be important and difficult, for we each represented countries most impacted by Japan’s expansion into Asia and

the Pacific, namely China and the United States, and we each had family members who had found themselves face to face with Japanese aggression. Edgar's uncle fought with the U.S. 2nd Marine Corps at Guadalcanal and Peleliu, and Ran Ying's family, including her mother, became refugees from advancing Japanese troops immediately following the Battle of Nanjing in late 1937. Edgar's uncle survived the war, while Ran Ying's family lost several members during their evacuation, including her grandfather. Thus, while we share our views of the consequences and legacies of the war from our perspective in the conclusion, we did not want our interpretation of the lives of Japanese citizens during the war to be colored by our preconceived personal biases. This was made all the easier because as we each made friends throughout the city and prefecture, we were struck by their willingness to share their stories and, at the same time, by the warmth and charm of the people around us. We wanted to introduce these everyday Japanese lives to an audience that remembers wartime Japan through the limited and foggy lens of a few events only, namely, Pearl Harbor, the Bataan Death March, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the surrender on the battleship *Missouri*. Our aim was to present another side of the story, one that focuses primarily on a period dominated by harsh militarization and xenophobic nationalism. We would invite them to express how the war had changed their lives and give their own reflections about and interpretations of those events. So we began, with Ran Ying first approaching her colleagues at the Foreign Tourist Information Office to inquire if they would agree to be interviewed. He agreed and in the end no one we approached declined. Following Edgar's experience in previous oral history projects, this proved unsurprising, as almost universally people enjoy sharing their life stories.

Preparing for this research, we understood the daunting task faced with recording and recounting oral history. Our oral history methodology is most closely aligned with grounded theory, an approach to research that originated in sociology and was outlined by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. "In its original form, it is an insistence that researchers come to a chosen topic without a hypothesis or preconceived notions. As research continues with a person or group, scholars can form their conclusions or hypotheses by analyzing data as they gather them and reinterrogating their information to see what insights they can gain." This can be summarized as: "A researcher does not begin a project with a preconceived theory in mind.... Rather the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data."¹

1 Mary A. Larson, in *Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Thomas Lee Charlton, Lois Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2006), p. 119.

One overriding concern for any historian engaged in oral history is that of memory reliability. Memory is selective and over many years it becomes largely a reconstructive exercise; even to the point of telling of stories that may in fact have happened to someone else, or which one hears about and integrates quite unknowingly into his or her own history. We presume this “imagination inflation” found its way into some of the stories we heard and recount in the following pages.² With this in mind, however, it is clear to us that the overriding themes and particulars that arise from this oral history make for a compelling and accurate interpretation of events from the period addressed. Except in rare exceptions we did not discover a *Rashomon* phenomena where different people viewed similar events in wildly different ways. The legacies and evaluations of these events, and, in fact, the moral values placed on them, do diverge, however, in several cases.

Prior to the first interviews, a list of questions was prepared that gave direction for the interview in a general sense, i.e., the topic would stay as much as possible on the war and Occupation years, while at the same time allowing for recollections to take the interview off in directions surprising, yet captivating at the same time. Each interviewee received the same list of questions, no matter the age or experience during the war. From there the interviews flowed depending on the specific experiences. For example, some were soldiers, so their battlefield experiences took the basic questions in that direction, while others too young to remember much of the war years were allowed to discuss what their parents had told them, and then jump to the questions related to the Occupation years where memory was firsthand. This approach follows the “thick dialogue” process utilized by the oral historian Alessandro Portelli, which requires “a flexible interview approach, but not the point of noninterference. ‘In thick dialogue, questions arise dialectically from answers.’”³

To build our interview list we depended initially on our own network, as described above. We then moved to “opportunistic recruiting” with the assistance of our friends’ and colleagues’ networks. From there the list of those to interview snowballed as introductions led to more introductions until over 40 people had been interviewed.

Interviews proceeded with the assistance of interpreters and translators when, as in most cases, the interviewees spoke little or no English. For this project we had the good fortune to have four professional interpreters and

2 Carole Wade and Carol Tavis, *Invitation to Psychology*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education), pp. 266-269.

3 Larson, p. 119.

translators working with us. They not only set up the interview schedules, but forwarded in advance the list of questions in Japanese to those requesting them and accompanied us to the interviews. All interpreters were Japanese. This was essential to ensure that the introduction of the two foreign interviewers proceeded with proper Japanese protocol and etiquette, which is especially important when visiting those of advanced years. Following the protocol formalities, the interviews began with an introduction by the interviewers, stating the reason for pursuing this study and showing appreciation for allowing us to talk with them. Most interviews took place in private homes, with some in business offices and community centers. Interviews lasted between one to two hours each. In all cases the hosts provided Japanese tea, fruit, and sweets. We also presented a gift to each interviewee at the end of the session, usually in the form of sweets. Each interview was taped with the authorization of the interviewee, then later transcribed and translated into English by the team of interpreters and translators.

It is the hope of the authors that the stories that comprise the bulk of this book, combined with original histories and media accounts of the times, will help the reader gain a more complete understanding of the impact the war had on families living in Japan during those horrific years. It is only through listening more, and lecturing less, that real dialogue can take place and greater understanding finds room to grow.

Preface

Oita Prefecture sits tucked away on the eastern shore of Japan's southern island of Kyushu. Historically, quiet fishing villages dotted this coastline while farmers cultivated rice and sweet potato in the farmlands edging up to the surrounding mountains. Starting on the southern coastal tip of the prefecture lies Saiki, and moving north one finds at intervals of a few miles Oita City, Beppu, Hiji, Kitsuki and, eventually, Usa and Nakatsu. All were destined to play intriguing, important and, at times, historic roles in Japan's war effort. In all cases the lives of people in these small towns, and dozens of hamlets in between, have rarely been shared outside the home and occasional local archives.

Even to this day, most Japanese outside Oita think little of the place, as though it is an afterthought in any conversation about Japanese culture and history. But between the years 1934 and 1945, these villages and towns were awash in Japanese military activities that transformed the lives of common fisherman and farmers into both observers and participants in what began as a glorious adventure and ended in earth-shattering destruction, disillusionment, hunger, and death. This is their story, told through the words of those who survived and eventually overcame the misery of defeat. It is, surprisingly, the story of a place that played a crucial role in the beginning of the war and was a place from which the last attack on the United States forces in the Pacific originated. Immediately following the war it continued to play an important role, as the small resort town of Beppu, which had been spared from any direct bombing, served as a regional headquarters of the American Occupation.

Map 1 Map of Japan highlighting location of Oita Prefecture (大分県)



Map 2 Map of Oita Prefecture highlighting key locations during the war

