

You Can Do Nothing But Wish

Animals, children, and war in Japanese picture books

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Contrary to some opinions, the Asia-Pacific War of 1937-1945 ‘has not been forgotten’ in Japan (Seaton, p. 7 and appendix). Indeed, perhaps no country has bombarded its children with stories about the horrors of war as much as Japan. Picture books (*ehon*), the entry to literature for young children, feature prominently in the arsenal of Japanese peace propaganda, and some of them have been translated into other languages as well, such as MARUKI Toshi’s *Hiroshima no pika* or KODAMA Tatsuharu’s *Shin’s Tricycle* (for ages 4 to 5, according to the Japanese publisher).

Although Japanese books for children and young adults do not necessarily shrink from depicting Japan and Japanese as aggressors, as Matthew Penney’s study of historical writings on the Nanking Massacre demonstrates, picture books about the war typically feature Japanese children as ‘the archetype of pure victimhood’ (Orr, p. 110). An impressive example, intended for preschool children, is *Okori Jizō* [The angry Jizō], based on a story by YAMAGUCHI Yūko, which portrays the death of a young girl immediately after the explosion of the atomic bomb over Hiroshima.¹



In one subset of this genre, hitherto rarely considered, animals appear as main protagonists. This essay will not concern itself with questions of historical accuracy or artistic and literary merit. Nor does it discuss whether small children should be confronted with this kind of content at all. Instead, it focuses on what these books teach children about their future part in society. Obviously, the animals here represent ‘pure victimhood’, taking the place otherwise occupied by children. The latter, on the other hand, are ‘indirect’ victims only and given a modicum of scope of action. By first giving the illusion of ‘empowering’ the children to help the animals, then showing up the futility of their actions, portraying their resigned acceptance of

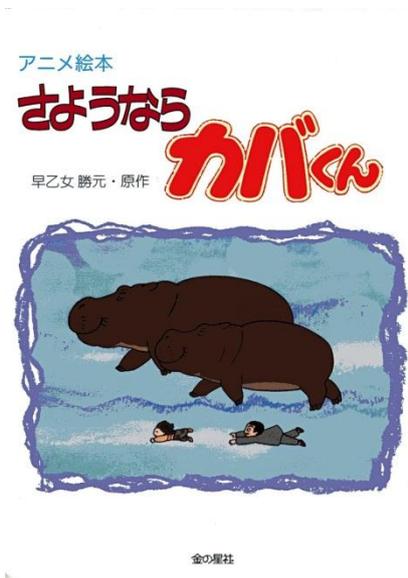
¹ The title refers to the Buddhist guardian deity of children, Jizō.

this outcome, and finally exhorting them to wish for ‘peace’ as the only solution, the authors, deliberately or not, provide their young readers with a clear-cut role model: as submissive members of a society directed by forces beyond their ken.

Starving Hippos

When talking about animals and the Asia-Pacific War in books for small children, the elephant in the room is, of course, TSUCHIYA Yukio’s *Kawaisōna zō*, telling a story of how the elephants in Tokyo’s Ueno Zoo were starved to death during the Second World War. Since 1970, this picture book has sold more than two million copies in Japanese (MATSUTANI Minoru) and has been translated into English – the second, better known version is called *Faithful Elephants* – and French, as well. However, both the book and the, quite different, actual events at Tokyo’s Ueno Zoo in 1943 have already been the subject of studies (Kawabata and Vandergrift; Litten); moreover, children do not play a major role in this story. Therefore, this essay will examine two other books: SAOTOME Katsumoto’s (1989) *Sayōnara Kaba-kun* [Farewell, Hippo] and YAMAMOTO Norito’s *Shiro to Takeshi* [Shiro and Takeshi].

Saotome’s book is concerned with a lesser known incident at Ueno Zoo in spring 1945 (cf. Litten). Illustrated with stills from the Japanese short animated film of the same title, *Sayōnara Kaba-kun* tells how the two hippos (mother and child) at Ueno Zoo were starved to death in early 1945. The narrator is a fictional eight-year-old boy, Daizaburō, who comes to live in the zoo with his younger sister Sachiko and his mother for a brief time, after an air raid had destroyed their home.



Daizaburō and Sachiko become fond of the two hippos, but shortly afterwards an order ‘from above’ demands that the hippos be killed because there is not enough food. The children decide that this order only applies to adults, not to them, and they try to feed and water the hippos. Before long, however, they are evacuated and learn from a letter that the younger hippo has died. When Daizaburō takes the chance to visit Ueno Zoo once more, the older hippo is also beyond saving: ‘Kyōko kept on for 37 days, but finally died. If only there had been no war, if only there had been no air attacks, they could have lived longer’.

Daizaburō and Sachiko are not passive when faced with the order ‘from above’, but use what little room is granted them as children to circumvent, rather than to confront authority. Yet their actions are subtly put into question as Saotome wonders whether Kyōko was really ‘saved’, or whether her suffering was simply prolonged, when the zoo keepers kept her alive during a bomb attack. After all, her death, by starvation, was a certainty the moment the order came ‘down’.

The adults in this story just follow orders. The author, too, submits to the standard storyline by not questioning the decision to starve the hippos, instead of shooting or poisoning them, or trying to keep them alive. (The available documentation of this event implies that the acting director of Ueno Zoo, FUKUDA Saburō, decided to kill the hippos, and that he decided upon starving them. Cf. Litten.) Neither in the story itself, nor in the afterword, any person is held responsible for the death of the ‘poor’ hippos and the method of killing.² It is all the fault of ‘war’ and of human beings’ obsession with always wanting more, in (alleged) contrast to animals.

Killing Dogs

Yamamoto’s story *Shiro to Takeshi* begins in December 1944 in Tokyo’s ‘shitamachi’ (literally, downtown). Takeshi is a third-grader, who lives with his mother and his dog Shiro, while his father is away fighting in the war. Considered too weak to be evacuated with his classmates, he spends much of his time with Shiro and a few remaining friends. One day, when playing in the neighbourhood park, a policeman comes up to the children and bellows: ‘Now, Japan is at war, keeping a dog and the like is luxury. Dogs should be killed.’ (p. 11) Soon, the neighbourhood committee arrives at Takeshi’s house and shows his mother an official notice asking her to sell their dog to the state, so that his fur could be used for protective clothing for the soldiers, and as a protection against rabies. As Shiro has been inoculated against rabies, the mother acquiesces in Takeshi’s wish to keep him.

シロとたけし

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² This reluctance to blame an individual sometimes even extends to historical studies. In her section on the ‘deliberate and planned’ starvation of the hippos in Ueno Zoo, Itoh (p. 55) refers to the ‘zoo’ taking the decision.

Later, the children are playing in a park when they hear dogs howling. They go to the police station and look over the wall: Soldiers are beating puppies to death one after another. ‘That this was done to prevent rabies was a lie.’ (p. 17)

When a soldier aggressively inquires about Shiro, Takeshi and his mother manage to hide him. After a while, however, another message from the authorities is circulated by the neighbourhood committee: All dogs have to be brought to the police the next day. This time Takeshi’s mother tells him that there is no alternative since they are in the middle of a war. Both go to the police station, where many people are already waiting to give up their dogs. But Shiro escapes back home.

The following day, while Takeshi is at school, soldiers again visit Takeshi’s mother and order her to give up Shiro, who should not be allowed to live another day. The soldiers then beat Shiro to death, enjoying it, as the drawn pictures (originally part of a slide show) make clear. When Takeshi comes back, he finds his mother at the gate of the police station and observes how the lifeless bodies of Shiro and numerous other dogs are being loaded onto a cart in the courtyard. In Takeshi’s dream that night Shiro says: ‘Takeshi, let’s meet again in a world without war.’ (p. 75)

This is another fictionalised account of wartime events, produced for primary-school children. According to Yamamoto, about 100,000 dogs may have been killed on orders of the ‘military’, in sharp contrast to the promotion of ‘Japanese dogs’ just a few years ago (Skabelund). Yet, this book’s conclusion, too, is ‘Let’s wish for peace’; only the abstract ‘military’ and the ‘war’ are held responsible.

No Defiance

The books just introduced, as well as MUKU Hatojū’s and KATŌ Nobuyo’s *Maya no isshō* [Maya’s life], a story similar to *Shiro to Takeshi*, show us a world where, for adults, obedience is all.³ Children do have a bit more freedom, but their minor acts of defiance come to nothing. They do not have the power to change the situation, nor do the adults, who don’t even really try. Out there are amorphous forces called ‘war’, ‘authorities’, ‘above’, or ‘military’, which literally rule over life and death.

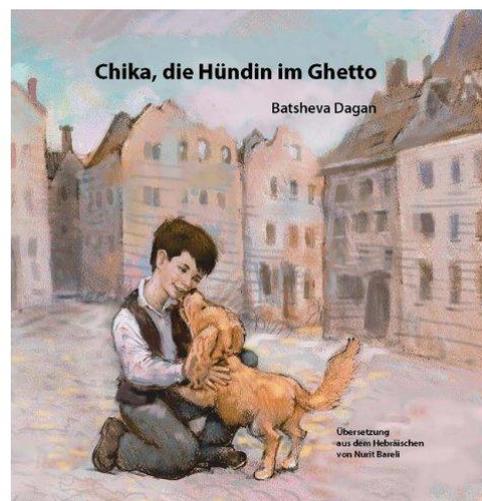
One picture book on animals and the war does portray a clear act of defiance, although children do not play a role in that part of the book. KOIDE Takashi’s *Zō ressha ga yattekita* [The elephant train has come] tells the story of Nagoya’s Higashiyama Zoo and its director KITAŌ Eiichi, who managed to keep two of the elephants alive, despite the animosity he encountered for not following orders to have them killed (cf. Itoh, pp. 86-99). Yet, even in this case, Kitaō’s giving in to orders to kill the lions and other animals is accorded more space and detail, than are his risky but successful confrontations with the city and military authorities in the case of the elephants. The fact that the afterword anonymises an (already deceased)

³ Tsuchiya’s *Kawaisōna Zō* and TANABE Mamoru’s *Soshite, Tonkī mo shinda*, a later and more truthful rendition of the starvation of the elephants in Ueno Zoo in 1943, both show small acts of defiance by adults, e.g. when a keeper secretly feeds the elephants. However, these actions are futile, and in the end it is ‘war’ again which is to blame.

military veterinary officer, who had helped the zoo at the time, also speaks volumes. Going against ‘authority’ is not something that is recommended in picture books.⁴



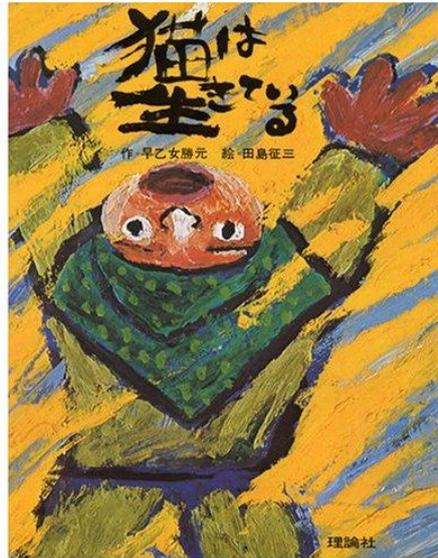
Western children’s books are meant to provide a different lesson. In her essay on the Holocaust in children’s literature, Annette Kliever (p. 232) writes: ‘Children should be given a positive hope, they should be encouraged to behave more democratically than their ancestors, to resist injustice in favour of humanity ...’. Holocaust survivor Batsheva Dagan’s picture book *Chika, die Hündin im Ghetto* [Chika, the dog in the ghetto], for example, tells the story of five-year-old Mikasch, who lives with his family and his dog Chika in a Jewish ghetto in Poland during the Second World War. When the Nazis order all dogs held by Jews to be brought to the police station, Mikasch’s father smuggles Chika out of the ghetto to a non-Jewish woman who, despite not having enough to eat herself, promises to take care of her. Mikasch and his family go into hiding, but after the liberation of the ghetto the whole family and Chika are reunited.



⁴ It should be noted, however, that other types of literature for (older) children, e.g. manga, do contain different messages. One example is provided by the mother in ŌKAWA Essei’s short story *Okāsan no ki* [Mother’s trees], who had seen her seven sons sent to war (p. 18): ‘Throughout Japan, fathers and mothers have been weak. If they’d all said as loud as possible that their sons shouldn’t be made soldiers and that they didn’t want war, it wouldn’t have come to this.’

No Happy Ending

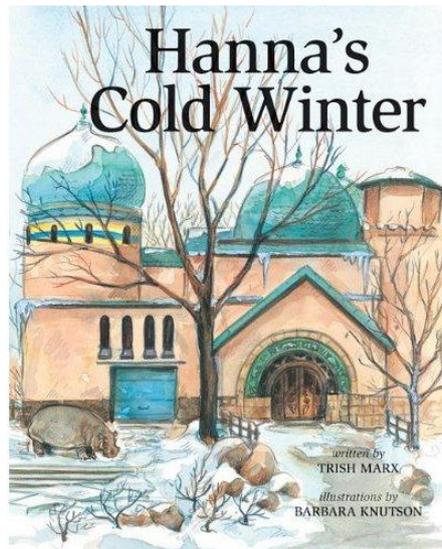
Japanese picture books, by contrast, seem to shy away from such lessons: defiance, let alone resistance, if shown at all, rarely gets blessed with positive results. In most cases the animals are dead in the end, so why bother at all? *Zō ressha ga yattekita* provides only a partial exception to this rule, whereas an earlier work by SAOTOME Katsumoto, the text-heavy picture book *Neko wa ikiteiru* [The cats are alive; 1973], discourages in a different way. A fatherless family of four and a similar (somewhat anthropomorphized) feline family of five have to endure the fire-bombing of Tokyo on 9/10 March 1945; the human family dies, while the cats survive. Even though in this case the humans do, in fact, help to save the animals, this will probably not cheer up the readers considering that the mother burns to death trying to protect her baby (unsuccessfully) and one of the cats (successfully), and that the boy Masao manages to get the other cats to safety only to slip, exhausted, into a canal and drown.⁵ In any case, this story contains no defiance of authorities, nor opportunity for it.



Even if nothing similar actually happened in Japan, why not come up with a positive story such as Trish Marx's *Hanna's Cold Winter*, where the citizens of Budapest save the hippos in their zoo during the Second World War by feeding them with straw sandals? But Japanese picture book authors, it seems, are not too eager to present examples of civic activity that is not endorsed, or indeed is actively opposed, by the authorities.⁶

⁵ According to his afterword, Saotome had been asked to provide a true picture of people during the Second World War for very young children (*osanaï kodomotachi*), up to the first years of primary school. This urge for 'realism', presumably, gives rise to a scene in *Neko wa ikiteiru* where Masao's younger sister burns up when an incendiary bomb gets stuck to her, complete with a nearly double-page illustration of fire bursting out of her back and a recollection of the sound that her going up in flames is supposed to have made (pp. 39-43). One might compare this to Christophe Gallaz' and Roberto Innocenti's well-known picture book *Rose Blanche*, where the death of the German girl Rose, who had helped inmates of a concentration camp outside her hometown, is not shown and only obliquely mentioned in the text.

⁶ It is perhaps symptomatic that the story of SUGIHARA Chiune who, as vice-consul in Kaunas, Lithuania, saved thousands of Jews by writing them visas against the orders of his superiors, has not been given the full picture book-treatment (yet?). However, a recent collection of short illustrated biogra-



Instead, the mantra of ‘war is bad’, ‘I hate war’, ‘no more war’ is repeated endlessly, just as if ‘war’ were a natural disaster, not initiated, influenced and perpetrated by society itself, but beyond human agency (see also Damico et.al.). But what is simply wishing for war not to happen again meant to accomplish, without giving children (and adults) at least some means and, even more vitally, hope of making a difference?

No Responsibility

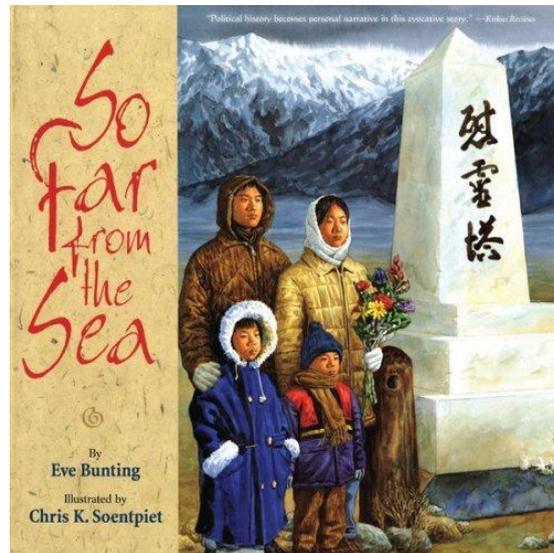
This situation is worsened by another trait of the books presented here: what genocide scholars call the ‘culture of impunity’. None of the perpetrators of cruelties described in these books is held to account, let alone punished – reflecting the historical reality. And what feelings should one have about these perpetrators? In his afterword to *Soshite, Tonkī mo shinda*, Ueno Zoo’s KOMORI Atsushi takes care to present them as afflicted by some kind of illness, and thus excused: ‘War is something that makes people into crazed demons.’

A recent non-fiction book, presumably for older children, by INOUE Komichi, *Inu ya neko ga kieta* [Dogs and cats have vanished], provides a more elaborate answer. Inoue covers several aspects of how and for what purposes cats and dogs were killed during the late stages of the Asia-Pacific War. She also includes the testimony of a man who had participated in such killings in Hokkaido (‘We must not make war again that makes us do such idiotic things’, p. 78) and a few accounts of people who did not give up their beloved animals. In her afterword Inoue writes (p. 116): ‘Do you think that the people who killed dogs and cats were terrible people? I don’t think so. And do you think that the people who didn’t follow orders and hid their dogs were sly [*zurui*]? I don’t think so.’

Eve Bunting’s *So Far from the Sea*, an American picture book about a Japanese-American family making a memorial visit to an internment camp for Japanese-Americans from the Second World War, nicely illuminates a different way of dealing with this question. At the end of the

phies to be read to children (PHP Kenkyūjo, pp. 64-67) includes his story, without mentioning that he had to leave the Japanese Foreign Ministry after the war because he had defied orders in this case. Considering the target group and the book’s aim of ‘providing dreams and hope’, this omission seems sensible.

book, the father, who was in the camp and whose own father died there, says ‘Sometimes in the end there is no right or wrong’, whereas his seven-year-old daughter whispers ‘It was wrong [...] Wrong. Wrong.’



Yet such alternative views are missing from too many Japanese picture book endings and afterwords. Neither the deaths of the animals, even when they are treated practically as family members like the dogs in *Shiro to Takeshi* and *Maya no isshō*, nor the actions leading to them are ever called ‘wrong’ in the end. To clearly condemn specific actions and to assign responsibility to individuals or groups is taboo: only war is to blame, and war explains all.⁷ Not the specific war, though – which might raise the question of responsibility for that war –, but ‘war’ as an abstract concept. As Inoue proclaims (p. 117): ‘The people who were robbed of their dogs and cats, the people who protected them, moreover the people who had to kill dogs and cats, to all of these people war was a harsh matter.’ And the ‘common message’ of those who were involved in these events in one way or the other is: ‘Please don’t let occur another tragedy that somehow leads the hearts of the people astray and sacrifices even animals’ (p. 118).

Certainly, children should not be encouraged to hate or bear grudges. But not to bring up the matter of (individual) responsibility at all in the wake of the horrific brutality depicted, to claim that everyone is a victim, and to argue that following orders excuses everything, is not a recipe for peace.

Not Just War, Not Just Animals

This essay has focused on picture books about animals and war. One could argue, therefore, that the patterns found in these rather special cases do not amount to much. However, the concerns expressed here do extend into other fields, even if one does not think of those much-loved animals as substitutes for people. Another picture book on a seemingly unrelated topic, MATSUTANI Miyoko’s *Watashi no imōto* [My little sister], illustrates this point. This story of a

⁷ This statement does not hold for each and every Japanese picture book concerning the Second World War, of course. I should perhaps also note that I do not believe that Western picture books on wars are, *per se*, better or more appropriate.

young girl, who never leaves her room after having been bullied in primary school and who dies after several years, shows several similarities to the books mentioned before. The girl comes across much like a traumatised animal: passive and unable to express herself. The mother is portrayed as powerless and clueless. The bullies, other girls from the school, do not seem to have been reprimanded, but simply go on with their life. Obvious questions, such as why the girl did not change school, why no psychiatrist was called in (only a physician is mentioned), and whether her death had anything to do with her self-imposed isolation, remain not only unanswered, but are not even raised.

わたしのいもうと

松谷みよ子 文・味戸ケイコ 絵



Interestingly, this book for primary-school children is part of a series of picture books ‘for the sake of peace’, apparently on the somewhat shaky premise that to ignore bullying would lead to Auschwitz. The only remedy it offers, however, is that of so many ‘peace books’: wishing that the impulse to bully (or discriminate, or make war) somehow disappears from human nature. And once more it is unlikely that such a Pollyannaish approach will solve an apparently widespread problem (Nathan, pp. 38-39).

Japanese picture books for children are not just mirrors of Japanese society and culture, but in some way blueprints, too. At such early ages, children can easily be impressed with values and taboos. In his seminal book *Embracing Defeat. Japan in the Wake of World War II* John Dower (pp. 439-440) argues that the American occupation and its ‘censored democracy’ contributed to what was later seen as ‘peculiarly Japanese’: ‘the continued socialization in the acceptance of authority – reinforcement of a collective fatalism vis-à-vis political and social power, and [...] a sense that ordinary people were really unable to influence the course of events.’

By promoting those traits and using near-magical, abstract concepts such as ‘war’ as an explanation, and excuse, for what the Japanese did during the Asia-Pacific War, many Japanese picture books do not just prevent a meaningful coming to terms with the past, but also play their part in preserving a system characterised as ‘friendly authoritarianism’ (Sugimoto, pp. 271-272). Whether this furthers peace, remains open to doubt.

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