

Jennifer Robertson

Beauty and Blood: Body Politics and "Race Reform" in Imperial Japan



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I came to the Wissenschaftskolleg with the intention of consolidating a new project on the cultural strategies of Japanese colonialism (1900-1945) and left with the satisfaction of having made a lot of progress toward that end. Although a challenge to negotiate, the libraries and archives in Berlin yielded a fairly rich store of Japanese materials on my general subject in addition to contemporary German sources documenting the vicissitudes of the Axis Alliance. However, I was a bit surprised to realize that Japan — and especially 20th-century Japan, the Sony building at Potsdamer Platz notwithstanding — is relatively unknown to German academics, whether as a culture or as a site for the development of methodological and theoretical innovations. Therefore, during my tenure here, I invested some time and energy in working with my German colleagues to help make Japan more familiar to non-specialists by presenting papers and advising students at different Berlin universities and forums. These initial efforts are just the beginning of what I hope develops into a long and fruitful trans-Atlantic collaboration.

My book-in-progress initiated at the Wissenschaftskolleg is tentatively titled *Beauty and Blood: Making Japanese Colonial Cultures*. In it, I address (or redress) two shortcomings in the literature on Imperial Japan and in the literature on imperialism and colonialism in general. First is the neglect of the popular, affective, aesthetic, and cultural dimensions of Japanese imperialism and colonial policy that have been

overlooked or ignored relative to the bureaucratic, military, and political-economic dimensions. Second is the lack of attention to the effects of the joint discourse of eugenics and "race reform" both on everyday life in Japan and on cultural relations between countries. In Imperial Japan, eugenics and "race reform" simultaneously constituted a deliberate strategy of foreign or colonial policy, and informed an ongoing, contested debate about Japanese national identity.

"New Japan" (*shin nippon*) was the name for a defiant Imperial Japan willing and ready to liberate Asia from the repressive yoke of European and American colonialism. On the one hand, the New Japan was an imagined community constructed from select artifacts of European and American material cultures — a nation whose Western inflections would allow it to withstand the encroachments of European and American powers. On the other hand, the New Japan was both the legacy of and repository for the products of Asia's ancient cultural histories, and bore the self-imposed burden of salvaging Asia for the Asians. New Japan occupied an ambiguous status as anticolonial colonizer, with a national cultural identity distinguished by a cultural hybridity.

In my colloquium, I explored the ambivalence of Imperial Japan toward both "the West" and Asia as it manifested itself in the increasingly politicized popular discourse of eugenics and "race reform" or "race hygiene." The nationalists, feminists (suffragists, birth control advocates), and "Japanists", whose converging and diverging positions collectively formed this early 20th century discourse, shared a common if differently vested interest in the "reform" of female bodies in particular. As I elaborated in my colloquium paper, three especially visible sites where eugenic body politics were played out in the first half of this century were the all-female revue theater, the "Miss Japan" and other beauty contests (including those staged in Asian countries under Japanese domination), and photographic advertisements promoting the new ideal of "healthy-body beauty" (*kenkôbi*).

It has been useful for me in this new project to conceptualize the Miss Japan contest, among other things, as constituting a nexus or node of social and political events, ideological debates, and everyday practices that all intersect and overlap, and undergo transformations over time and space. In this way, I am able to bring together things which only appear unrelated but actually share a contiguous and continuous relationship. And perhaps most importantly, a nexus approach in general enables the rediscovery of the historical connectedness of things whose connectedness has been forgotten, overlooked, or dismissed for one reason or another — such as, in this case, the connections between Miss Japan, the Japanese eugenics movement, and Japanese colonial policy.

For the Japanese people, colonialism and the imperial ethos were experienced and expressed through discourses, institutions, and everyday practices such as folk concepts of "race" and "blood", and (photographic) beauty contests. These concepts and events are not as innocuous as they may seem, and as a historical cultural nexus, certainly complicate our understanding of the culture of colonialism and its legacies.