CHILDREN

Children are usually figured as non-combatants in discourse about war. The vulnerability of their presence in a war zone is often of tremendous concern to adults and therefore images of children figure prominently in home front propaganda, such as that urging British mothers to evacuate their children to the countryside during World War Two. But images of children are often used to serve a less denotative, more connotative purpose. The image of childish innocence speaks not to the mind but to the unconscious, affective responses of adults, and makes the destructive actions of the enemy appear all the more heinous. Together with images of other innocent victims—young women, nuns, the elderly—children therefore appear in a lot of World War Two propaganda aimed at adults, in all the countries involved.

But children are not often considered appropriate targets for propaganda; the psychological value of their innocence trumps the need to indoctrinate them in the ugly necessities of wartime. Perhaps it is believed that children have little direct role to play, and will obey adult commands, so it is not necessary to “sell” the war to them as it is to their parents and older siblings. Among the many posters, pictures, and other narrative media in Juliet Gardiner’s The Children’s War: The Second World War through the eyes of the children of Britain, for example, there are no materials aimed at school-aged children themselves.

In some of the nations involved in World War Two, organizations for children and youth were influential in preparing young people for eventual combat roles, notably Germany’s Hitlerjugend. But scholarship on children in Germany and Italy focuses on mobilization materials aimed at “youth”—those in their mid teens and above—suggesting that there was no significant home front propaganda in those countries for younger children. In contrast, David Earhart has rightly argued that “Japanese children [of all ages] were mobilized on a scale far beyond anything attempted in the United States, Great Britain, or even the occupied nations of Europe, perhaps surpassing even Nazi Germany,” and kamishibai played a crucial role in several aspects of that mobilization. As Barak Kushner points out, “Examining kamishibai allows us to analyze how the future soldiers of Japan [i.e. children] understood the value and significance of Japan’s imperial war.”

In a previous study I have discussed the mobilization of Japanese children in the Fifteen Year War through media such as textbooks, songbooks, magazines, fiction, and essay/oratory contests, as well as (briefly) kamishibai. While there are similarities of theme, trope and intention in the juvenile propaganda in all of these materials, kamishibai had a unique role to play in instructing children in wartime ideologies.

For one thing, kamishibai was ubiquitous, more widespread than any medium other than perhaps the textbooks or songbooks used in schools. In con-

Arise, Young Citizens of Japan!, detail of fig. 41.
contrast, only children from wealthier households could afford to subscribe to children’s magazines such as *Shōjo no tomo* (Girls’ Friend) or *Shōnen kurabu* (Boys’ Club), or to buy many picture books or works of children’s literature. Films, too, were beyond the economic reach of many children, especially in rural areas. Moreover, after Pearl Harbor there were increasing shortages of paper and film stock, not to mention the shortage of labor, so that fewer films were made, and magazines grew progressively thinner or were discontinued altogether.8

In contrast, kamishibai—once concentrated primarily in cities, and particularly in the blue-collar neighborhoods in its street corner version—was shown to children of all classes and regions during the war. Kamishibai producers such as the NKKK continued to get paper even as shortages became acute in other media, suggesting the government’s recognition of the importance and effectiveness of this medium: cheap to produce, easy to distribute, easy to show anywhere, anytime. And memoirs from the period suggest that children continued to view kamishibai as entertainment, as a part of their special secret childhood world, even when the content of the plays was militaristic or frankly propagandistic.9 It is especially easy to indoctrinate someone who feels an affinity for the medium of indoctrination and views the experience as pleasure rather than coercive education.

Given that both street corner and educational kamishibai were associated with the entertainment and pedagogical advancement of children, it is no surprise that governmental organizations such as the Ministry of Education, and quasi-governmental ones such as the IRAA, considered it a medium particularly suited to communicating important messages to a young audience. Memoirs by people who were children in the 1940s make it clear that street corner performers who came to their neighborhoods during the war often performed propaganda plays full of military derring-do or messages about savings accounts rather than the *ero-guro nansensu* plays of the prewar years. As far as the children were concerned, such plays fully qualified as entertainment.10

But the street corner was not the only venue for children’s propaganda kamishibai. Nursery school and kindergarten children and elementary school students had government-sponsored kamishibai plays performed for them in schools, where they constituted a captive audience. Neighborhood association leaders and government-recruited volunteers performed kamishibai for local children. After July 1944, when urban children were sent to the countryside in large numbers, kamishibai plays were used by their caregivers both to teach/indoctrinate and to entertain the lonely evacuees. (See Chapter Two figure 13.) Magazine articles urged children to create patriotic plays themselves and to perform them for each other. For those who were less imaginative, magazines for children incorporated patriotic kamishibai plays with line drawings that could be easily copied onto larger paper, colored in, and performed at home or with friends, together with instructions for constructing a homemade frame to hold and display the picture cards.

When considering the war experience of children in Japan, therefore, an analysis of the role and content of kamishibai is indispensable. In this chapter we will explore the different kinds of wartime plays aimed at different segments of the juvenile audience, and the kinds of messages delivered by the plays’ scripts and pictures.

**KAMISHIBAI AS PROPAGANDA FOR CHILDREN**

On December 23, 1941, the inaugural meeting of the Nippon Shōkokumin Bunka Kyōkai (National Association for Young Citizens’ Culture) was held in the Gunjin Kaikan (Soldiers’ Hall) in Kudan, Tokyo; this meeting is narrativized in the kamishibai play *Furue Nippon shōkokumin* (*Arise, Young Citizens of Japan!* 1942).11 The play was produced to mark the establishment of this important group, the purpose of which was to organize and oversee all the propaganda efforts aimed at Japan’s children, now to be known as “young citizens” (shōkokumin).12 It begins by describing the meeting