School Songs, the War, and Nationalist Indoctrination in Japan

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According to the history books, the Russo-Japanese War broke out on February 8, 1904. In actual fact, however, as far as Japan is concerned, this war’s beginnings date back to 1894, the year in which the Sino-Japanese War broke out. This war’s significance as the real starting point of Japan’s attack on Russia can be observed if one examines the school songs published in Japan even before the Sino-Japanese War and immediately after Japan’s victory in that war, from 1894 on.

This assertion may, perhaps, strike one as surprising. School songs (shōka), naive and innocent as they may sound and appear, are not commonly perceived in the West as related to matters of war or government policy. Such a connection does not seem possible or even plausible if one is not aware of the fundamental difference between shōka in Japan and school songs in the West. In the West, school songs are usually selected from existing songs according to the taste of the compiler or the music teacher. There are no defined rules that limit the selection, only a preference for easily singable melodies and understandable texts. The songs’ content is not taken into consideration so long as it does not offend conventions of morals or good behavior.

This is not the case with regard to shōka in Japan. Shōka songs are an invention of the early Meiji period, since in traditional Japanese music there were no kinds of songs with easily singable melodies and texts suitable for instruction in schools – except for folksongs. But folksongs were associated with the locations where they had originated, and were, therefore, not considered suitable for instruction on a national level. The introduction of music instruction in schools, an innovation stipulated by the Education Law of 1872, called for the training of music teachers and also for preparing new songbooks as tools for music instruction. These tasks were entrusted to the Ministry of Education and a special
department established there for this purpose, unassumingly called “Music Investigation Committee” (Ongaku Torishirabe Gakari). For these new textbooks the Ministry commissioned songs from writers approved by the authorities.

The first school songbook was published in 1881 – Shōgaku shōka-shū1 (“Collection of school songs for elementary schools”), edited by the Ministry of Education’s Music Investigation Committee. Most of the songbooks that followed in the Meiji period were also published by the Ministry of Education or were authorized (kenteizumi) by it. Only these books were permitted for use in schools. The Education Ministry did not function as a mere rubber stamp for approval of the songs and songbooks submitted to it. Certain songs were returned to the editors with detailed comments by a senior ministry official, demanding corrections and alterations in order to make the texts conform to the principles of morals and policies determined by the authorities. There were also cases when song collections were returned in order to make the editors add songs that would convey ideas or principles that the authorities insisted on instilling into the pupils’ minds, such as patriotism, emperor worship, discipline with regard to parents, teachers, and seniors, and relevant rules in the spirit of the Confucian Weltanschauung that then prevailed in the official Japanese education system.

The examination of shōka books may, then, provide a veritable voyeuristic experience for anyone wishing to obtain information on the official standpoint or policy in matters that were perhaps veiled – intentionally or not – and confusing or controversial in other official pronouncements, but had to be formulated unequivocally in order to be absorbed properly into the tender young consciousness. School songs functioned, consequently, as a tool – not necessarily the only one, but one of the most efficient – in education, indoctrinating and brainwashing the young generation in all matters relating to morals, civic duties, and political views that the authorities wished to impose. It is, therefore, difficult to exaggerate in evaluating the decisive influence of these songs on the character formation of the young people who were educated in the elementary and secondary school system from the beginning of the Meiji era onward.

The songs in the first shōka books dealt mostly with natural phenomena, such as flowers, birds, the wind, and the moon, likely to foster love of nature and also love of the fatherland where these beautiful things exist. These songs, apparently innocent, thus frequently function as camouflage of a patriotic education that presents natural phenomena also as models for emulation – for the cultivation of morals, good conduct, and proper manners. There are also songs that convey clearer patriotic messages, such as emperor worship, and traditional values drawn from history and mythology. Positive character traits such as diligence, reliability, honesty, and studiousness also rank prominently among the values sometimes implied in a more or less veiled fashion. In these first songs, patriotic values were presented in quite reasonable and