

Symposium | Trauma : [Symposium 59] Cultural Responses to WW2 in Japan: Interdisciplinary Reflections and Intercultural Dialogue

🏠 Sat. Sep 27, 2025 9:00 AM - 10:30 AM JST | Sat. Sep 27, 2025 12:00 AM - 1:30 AM UTC 🏠 Session Room 6 (Conference Room B)

[Symposium 59] Cultural Responses to WW2 in Japan: Interdisciplinary Reflections and Intercultural Dialogue

Moderator: Yuki Imoto (Keio University), Kai Ogimoto (Sagami Women's University) Discussant: Koh Eugen (University of Melbourne)
Discussant: Eugen Koh (University of Melbourne)

[SY-59-02] Japanese Narrative of World War 2 through the Cultural Lens of Japanese Tanka: Tragic Acceptance of War Realities and Its Implications

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As the fierce resistance and eventual cancellation of the planned Enola Gay exhibition, which attempted to incorporate human suffering in Hiroshima after the atomic bombing around the 50th anniversary of the end of World War 2, starkly illuminates, the American collective narrative of the war tends to justify that bombing without taking the perspective of the victims. Similarly unbalanced yet in the opposite direction, the Japanese public narrative of the war with a focus on victimization still exists in Japan as the 80th anniversary is approaching.

This study is a small but sincere effort to reflect on Japanese narratives in a self-introspective manner by exploring tanka, a uniquely Japanese short poetry form consisting of just 31 syllables, composed on the battlefields abroad and the home front in Japan during and after the war by tanka poets. They either fought to kill or be killed as officers/soldiers or survived the bombing while witnessing painful death all around them as civilians. I also include tanka by other poets who did not participate in battlefield killing or experience the atomic bombing yet continued to ponder the grave implications of the war for themselves and Japan long after it ended.

Major themes from these tanka are first, an absence of anger towards the U.S.A.; second, empathic sadness for the atomic bombing victims and their last shining moments; third, an outcry against war's cruelty coupled with repentance; and lastly, lingering sorrowful helplessness and emptiness in the peaceful postwar period. By using Japanese cultural concepts/attitudes of *shikata ga nai* (it cannot be helped), *mono no aware* (sorrowful appreciation of the impermanence of life/beauty), and non-confrontational conflict resolution style, I will try to elucidate these themes.