



Open Library of Humanities

## Review of Susan Westhafer Furukawa's *The Afterlife of Toyotomi Hideyoshi: Historical Fiction and Popular Culture in Japan*

Scott Mehl, Colgate University, US, [smehl@colgate.edu](mailto:smehl@colgate.edu)

---

Susan Westhafer Furukawa's *The Afterlife of Toyotomi Hideyoshi: Historical Fiction and Popular Culture in Japan* (Harvard University Press, 2022) is an engagingly written study of twentieth- and twenty-first-century representations of a crucial figure in Japanese history. The research is thorough; the critical underpinnings of the study are accessibly presented; the illustrations, which grace nearly every chapter, serve to enhance what is already a valuable addition to any library that is staying abreast of significant developments in Japanese literary and historical scholarship.

---



It would be possible to teach an entire Japanese culture course based only on *adaptations* of famous Japanese cultural properties, a topic about which a number of fine monographs have been published in recent years. Take, for example, Christine Guth's *Hokusai's Great Wave: Biography of a Global Icon* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), which is a thorough archaeology of the global reception and circulation of Hokusai's famous print. There are also such literary studies as Michael Emmerich's *The Tale of Genji: Translation, Canonization, and World Literature* (Columbia University Press, 2013), John A. Tucker's *The Forty-Seven Rōnin: The Vendetta in History* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), and Gergana Ivanova's *Unbinding the Pillow Book: The Many Lives of a Japanese Classic* (Columbia University Press, 2021) that examine the ecologies of literary reception in Japan. Morgan Pitelka's *Spectacular Accumulation: Material Culture, Tokugawa Ieyasu, and Samurai Sociability* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2016) argues that Tokugawa Ieyasu's afterlives have been at least partially sustained by the circulation of meaningful objects. With their wide range of archives and methodologies, these and similar scholarly texts can be seen as explaining received wisdom about Japanese history as the—perhaps only temporary—outcome of complicated shifts in how the past has been reproduced and consumed.

Furukawa's monograph belongs in this growing library, as it examines Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), the second of the three so-called unifiers of Japan (after Oda Nobunaga but before Tokugawa Ieyasu). Furukawa's first chapter compactly surveys Hideyoshi's life based on documentary evidence, some written by Hideyoshi himself. Soon after his death, Hideyoshi became an object of textual resurrection, as Furukawa explains in a close examination of the first biography of Hideyoshi, Oze Hoan's *Taikōki* (1626), which “establishes a pattern of fictionalization of Hideyoshi that continues to this day” (39).

The remaining chapters of Furukawa's study then advance to the twentieth century, considering a succession of reimaginings of Hideyoshi shaped by their immediate contexts. The second chapter reveals a wartime Hideyoshi through its many-layered examination of Yoshikawa Eiji's *Shinsho Taikōki*. First serialized in *Yomiuri Shinbun* from 1939 to 1945 and later published as a book in 1950, Yoshikawa's retelling of Hideyoshi's life characterizes him as “an example of perseverance, hard work, proper pan-Asiatic thinking, and nationalism to further [the] various war-related agendas” of many Japanese who supported the war effort (83)—this despite the inconvenient fact that Hideyoshi “was unsuccessful in his bid to conquer land beyond Japan” (64). The dissonance between wartime exigencies and Hideyoshi's failed projects on the Asian continent raises questions that “remain unanswered (indeed, untouched) throughout Yoshikawa's novel and *Yomiuri*'s coverage of it,” Furukawa writes (65).

Furukawa's third chapter takes up Hideyoshi's transformation, during the postwar decades of high economic growth, into the perfect boss of a Japanese company—into, as Furukawa puts it, “an ideal human resource manager and a commerce leader” (84). In 1950s and 1960s texts by writers such as Kasahara Ryōzō and Shiba Ryōtarō, Hideyoshi is envisioned as the proto-*sararīman*, the embodiment of the virtues that make rank-and-file employees great and CEOs greater. Another writer, Tsutsui Yasutaka—perhaps best known for his science fiction—satirized this view of Hideyoshi in a short story that conflates two time periods, the postwar era and the time of Hideyoshi, thereby “highlight[ing] the incongruities” present in certain practices of historical fiction (115). The fourth chapter is a reading of feminist critiques of Hideyoshi in historical fiction by Ariyoshi Sawako and Nagai Michiko from the late 1960s and early 1970s—critiques that “challenge patriarchal structures while also deconstructing well-known narratives of the past” (149). The fifth chapter takes up the image of Hideyoshi in the twenty-first century by adopting an approach somewhat different from that of the more text-focused previous chapters: it is a study of Hideyoshi as a magnet for tourist dollars (rather, tourist yen) at sites such as Saga Nagoya Castle—“the site from which Hideyoshi's troops set out to attack the Korean peninsula” in the last decade of the 1500s (156–57)—and Kōdaiji Temple in Kyoto, where visitors can buy cute Hideyoshi-themed trinkets. The epilogue extends the argument of the book by providing examples of representations of Hideyoshi in still other media, such as television serials, manga, and films.

Furukawa's study makes several contributions to the study of modern Japanese literature, as it brings to light an archive that is little known outside Japan but arguably quite well known to Japanese readers, and Furukawa's methodology could fruitfully be transposed to studies of the “afterlife” of other significant figures in Japanese history and literature. It is worth observing that Furukawa's study wears its theory lightly and, as I have said, accessibly. The introduction draws upon well-known concepts of historicism and historical fiction—such as Stephen Greenblatt's notion of self-fashioning; Narita Ryūichi's three-variable approach to historical narratives (in which a reader is invited to consider “the time in which the story is set, the time during which it was written, and the time during which it is being read” [4]); Pierre Nora's “history of the second degree” (5), which explains how popular conceptions of history are mediated by prior interpretations; and Satō Tadao's notion of the *sakuhingun* (which might be translated as “franchise”; Furukawa herself offers the apt gloss “media conglomerate” [12]). These concepts recur throughout *The Afterlife of Toyotomi Hideyoshi*, giving the text as a whole a useful methodological consistency.

I began this review by suggesting Furukawa's text would be ideally suited for inclusion in a course on adaptations, but the individual chapters in Furukawa's study would fit a number of class settings—from courses on literature by Japanese women to courses on modern media to courses on so-called contents tourism. And any syllabus about Japanese warrior culture would do well to include Furukawa's book. While there is the occasional slip in chronology (for example, Masamune Hakuchō, who was present at a panel discussion of Hideyoshi in the late 1930s, did not die in 1902 but rather in 1962), and while a few of the inconsistent transliterations might present difficulties for students who are unfamiliar with Japanese (for example, Hideyoshi's alternative name is printed in Furukawa's book sometimes as Tokichirō, sometimes as Tōkichirō), the text is generally polished and is written clearly. Suitable for undergraduates of all levels, Furukawa's study will be a useful introduction to the pressing questions that arise at the intersection between Japanese literature and historiography.

---

**Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

---

