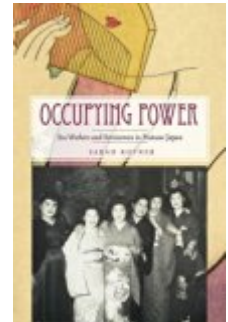


**Sarah Kovner.** *Occupying Power: Sex Workers and Servicemen in Postwar Japan.*  
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On August 14, 1945, Japan accepted the Potsdam Declaration and surrendered to the Allies unconditionally. Within two weeks, the first U.S. military contingent arrived at the Atsugi Airfield on the outskirts of Tokyo, marking the beginning of the Allied Occupation—functionally the American occupation—which lasted for roughly six-and-a-half years, until April 1952. In looking at these turbulent years, we might assume, as the surrender was unconditional, that the occupiers exercised absolute power over the occupied. Also, we might view the increase in sex workers, commonly known as “geisha girls” or *panpan*, in postwar Japanese society as representing a symbolic episode of powerless victims at the lowest social stratum of society, being forced to sell their bodies to foreign conquerors. These are two major myths that Sarah Kovner’s *Occupying Power: Sex Workers and Servicemen in Postwar Japan* challenges.

Informed by recent developments in women’s studies and empire studies, and inspired by the recent surge in grassroots history in studies of postwar Japan, *Occupying Power* provides a much

more nuanced picture of power dynamics at this historical moment between occupiers and occupied, and between servicemen and streetwalkers. It argues that, as in cases of European colonial governance in many parts of the world, the American occupation of Japan could not have materialized without collaboration and local support, and that many Japanese women, though such certainly may not have been their first choice, went on to sex work more or less voluntarily in ways that surprised and unsettled both their countrymen and occupation authorities. “What remains remarkable about postwar Japan,” Kovner writes, “is how, if only for a brief period, those who are usually thought of as the most powerless and most victimized—people who sell their own bodies—were suddenly in a pivotal position. They were potent symbols of defeat, but they were not just symbols. They could actually negotiate the terms of their own relationship with the occupiers.... [I]t was not an unconditional surrender” (p. 17).

These two major themes—the decriminalization of sex workers and the recognition of their agency, as well as the emphasis on collaboration and local manipulation—are addressed throughout the book. Chapter 1 traces how, with the beginning of the occupation, venereal diseases (VD) quickly spread among GIs, and how U.S. authorities and the British Commonwealth Forces—a coalition of troops from Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and India—responded to this. While occupying forces and Japanese police simply viewed VD as women’s diseases and Japanese prostitutes as the source of infection, and, thus, rounded up hundreds of women almost randomly, Kovner reveals that the “reservoir” of disease was more likely Allied servicemen, themselves, who had been already infected before their arrival. The locations that had the highest rates of VD, in fact, were Nagasaki, Fukuoka, and Kanagawa, all of which had U.S. military bases and large numbers of servicemen. Surprised at the spread of disease among GIs, the supreme commander for the Allied Powers banned organized sexual service centers and ordered the abolition of all laws licensing sex work, which, though unintentionally, argues Kovner, ended up spurring the development of a deregulated sex market, with its own dynamics.

Chapter 2, then, details such dynamics in everyday interactions between servicemen and women through briefly observing a variety of relationships, from brutal rape cases to much more intimate relations, such as romantic affairs and marriages, as well as commercial sexual relations—that is, prostitution within and outside of brothels. The most original contribution here is the author’s use of court reports, from which we can catch a glimpse of how and why ordinary sorts of women chose to be streetwalkers in the postwar period. In describing such cases, Kovner aims at showing agency on the side of Japanese prostitutes, arguing that they were distinctively different from the Japanese military’s comfort women during wartime, an analogy offered by earlier studies on *panpan*. Chapter 3 continues to

take a social-history and grassroots approach, providing a topographical view of growing and increasingly visible sex markets in postwar Japan. In this chapter, Kovner examines local tensions in military-base areas, such as Sasebo and Tokyo, through describing how *panpan* came to be a vivid and contentious symbol of defeat, objects of hatred and discrimination among a large portion of the population. Sex workers for foreign occupiers were detested, argues Kovner, because many men and women discovered in this a way to display abiding nationalism.

Chapters 4 and 5 investigate the impact of such anti-prostitution sentiments and efforts in national politics in the mid- to late 1950s, describing how female activists and legislators, as well as women’s organizations, fought to pass laws against prostitution, and how Prime Minister Hatoyama Ichiro and his colleagues manipulated the contents of the 1956 Prostitution Prevention Law so that it would not substantially threaten the business of brothel owners. These chapters argue that the crux of the anti-prostitution movements was not so much about strong dislike of the act of prostitution, itself, but disgust toward prostitution with foreign occupiers. “Popular distaste for prostitution with non-Japanese clients,” Kovner concludes, “ended three centuries of regulated sex work” in Japan (p. 5). Finally, chapter 6 surveys the development and diversification of new sex industries in Japan in the second half of the twentieth century, arguing that sex workers’ labor conditions worsened following the criminalization of prostitution, echoing recent feminists’ arguments that commercialized sex can be empowering under certain circumstances, and that sex work can be compared to other kinds of service work.

*Occupying Power* is largely successful in conveying such conceptual points, but it leaves some questions unanswered, in terms of its more historically specific interpretation. While the author seems to attribute the end of licensed prostitution in Japan to popular distaste for *panpan* who con-

sorted with non-Japanese clients, the situation might have been a little more complicated. To begin with, popular attitudes toward panpan might not have been as one-sidedly negative as the book describes. In fact, in this early postwar period, panpan's voices and pictures appeared in radio shows, magazines, and cartoons, with some depicting them in tones that were not necessarily negative. Also, a song which expressed the feelings of panpan became a big hit. One panpan published a collection of haiku describing her life, and another active prostitute even stood as a candidate for a local election in the Shinjuku ward in 1947. Likewise, opinion polls often showed divided feelings toward panpan at that time, with some strongly opposed, but others sympathetic. If popular sentiments were entirely anti-panpan, as this book implies, it is difficult to explain these phenomena and poll results.

Such conflicting situations can be analyzed as revealing ongoing social and culture wars following Japan's defeat in the war. After all, this period represents historical moments in which, on the one hand, conventional moral codes and social norms were challenged, while a conservative backlash arose in response to these challenges, on the other. In fact, the immediate postwar period observed a sudden evolution in terms of acceptance and praise of eroticism and sexual desire, as seen in the emergence of sex novels and poems, as well as pornographic magazines. At the same time, however, the period observed the development of anti-pornography and anti-prostitution movements, often carried out by local women's and mothers' associations. Viewed in this way, the shift in the landscape of the sex industry in the 1950s might be better understood as part of broader social conflicts which were ongoing beneath the Allied occupation.

That is to say, the fact that it left these questions open does not spoil the value of this book at all. After all, an excellent work of scholarship always opens up further discussion, rather than

closing it off. Overall, *Occupying Power* is a new and important addition to the recently growing literature of the social and grassroots history of postwar Japan. Kovner, indeed, opens up and develops a new field exploring the crossroads between international relations and intimate histories through examining both high politics and the everyday lives of servicemen and sex workers—a direction that John Dower only touched on in his monumental book, *Embracing Defeat*, about a decade ago. The book further deserves praise for incorporating up-to-date developments in the fields of women's, feminist, and sexuality studies, as well as empire and nationalism studies, into the study of occupied Japan, making the book multidisciplinary by nature. Without doubt, therefore, *Occupying Power* should attract a wide audience in diverse fields.

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