

University of Wollongong

Research Online

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts -
Papers (Archive)

Faculty of Arts, Social Sciences & Humanities

1-1-2014

Book review: The art of censorship in postwar Japan. Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute. By Kirsten Cather

Rowena G. Ward

University of Wollongong, roward@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Law Commons](#)

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Book review: The art of censorship in postwar Japan. Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute. By Kirsten Cather

Abstract

The practice of censorship is a divisive issue that is often justified on moral reasons rather than aesthetic or legalistic ones. It is perhaps because of the claims to morality rather than to the law that it is relatively rare for censorship (or more accurately in Japan's case, obscenity) to be the subject of criminal trials. Yet, in Japan, from the occupation years through to the present day, there has been on average one high profile censorship trial per decade. In *The Art of Censorship in Postwar Japan*, Kirsten Cather considers seven such censorship trials held between the 1950s and 2007 to highlight the "complexity of the interaction between censor and artist" in the practice of censorship.

Keywords

censorship, postwar, japan, art, review, studies, weatherhead, book, east, cather, asian, institute, kirsten

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

Ward, R. (2014). Book review: The art of censorship in postwar Japan. *Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute*. By Kirsten Cather. *Pacific Affairs*, 87 (1), 158-159.

THE ART OF CENSORSHIP IN POSTWAR JAPAN. *Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute.* By Kirsten Cather. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012. x, 334 pp. (Figures.) US\$45.00, cloth. ISBN 978-0-8248-3587-3.

The practice of censorship is a divisive issue that is often justified on moral reasons rather than aesthetic or legalistic ones. It is perhaps because of the claims to morality rather than to the law that it is relatively rare for censorship (or more accurately in Japan's case, obscenity) to be the subject of criminal trials. Yet, in Japan, from the occupation years through to the present day, there has been on average one high profile censorship trial per decade. In *The Art of Censorship in Postwar Japan*, Kirsten Cather considers seven such censorship trials held between the 1950s and 2007 to highlight the "complexity of the interaction between censor and artist" (1) in the practice of censorship. More specifically, Cather shows how Japan's postwar censorship trials—at the lower court and High Court level—have largely not been about the legal aspects of whether a work is obscene or not and therefore should be subject to the censor, but have often involved the prosecution and the defense justifying their positions largely on other factors. These factors include its advertising and the reputation of the translator (*Lady Chatterley's Lover*), the self-regulator (*Eiga Rinri Kitei Kanri Inkaei or Eirin*), the publishing house (*Lady Chatterley's Lover*) and the film studio (*Nikkatsu*). In short, Cather shows how the trials were often fought on critical and political grounds more than on legal ones. To illustrate her argument, Cather uses a mix of examples of censorship trials from a number of different genres including local film (*Black Snow*), translated books (*Lady Chatterley's Lover*) as well as manga (*Honey Room*). However, whilst the wide range of genres covered clearly shows that the censorship trials have targeted a variety of genres, it also means that the book lacks coherence and leads to an unevenness in the coverage of some trials. To her credit, Cather has recognized the coherence issue and has tried to circumvent it by dividing the book into four parts, each with an introduction outlining the background to the censorship of the works covered. However, because these introductions refer back to earlier chapters, the division of the book into parts adds to the lack of coherence. The pure ambitiousness of a study of trials over such a long period of time means that it is almost inevitable that there will be some unevenness to the analysis of the trials. This could have been avoided by focusing on fewer trials but this too would have raised questions about the balance in the analysis.

Despite the above criticisms, there is a lot to recommend the book and here I would like to focus on its two main strengths. The first strength lies in the diversity of sources used: in the majority of cases, Cather refers to the trial records and where these are not available, the verdicts. In all cases, she has consulted an array of secondary sources, and in some cases, interviewed participants. Yet, direct quotes are used sparingly, perhaps too sparingly,

and the quotes add to the argument. The mix of sources clearly places the censorship trials in their historical and political context as well as part of the story about the application of censorship over the past six or so decades.

The second strength lies in the story that Cather tells about the application of censorship to art since the occupation, and more broadly, the impact of the United States-imposed constitution on the operations of the Japanese legal system. Specifically, Cather highlights how in all postwar censorship trials, the prosecution and the defence appeal to two different legal codes to construct their arguments: the prosecution to Article 175 of the Criminal Code and the defence to the Constitution's ban on censorship (Article 21) (3-14). This legal dichotomy is further complicated by the differences in the timing of when works of art become subject to proceedings. The *Black Snow* trial, for instance, was focussed on a preview version of the film, which had been substantially changed before release and therefore was no longer available (chapter 3). Such arbitrariness clearly shows the politics behind the application of censorship if not the law in general.

The Art of Censorship is difficult to classify: it is not a legalistic text, nor does it constitute literary criticism or pure history or politics. Despite my reservations over the ambitiousness of Cather's aims and the coherence in argument in places, it is a valuable addition to the growing volume of work that considers the importance of the historical context to the application of Japanese law. As such, the book would interest scholars interested in the politics of the Japanese court process as well as changes to the application of censorship law since 1945. Some chapters, in particular those on *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, would be suitable for undergraduates looking at the impact of the constitution on the mechanics of legal process or the cultural politics surrounding translated texts.

University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia

ROWENA WARD

RUSSO-JAPANESE RELATIONS, 1905-1917: From Enemies to Allies.
Routledge Studies in Modern History of Asia, 72. By Peter Berton. London; New York: Routledge, 2012. xix, 203 pp. (Map.) US\$155.00, cloth. ISBN 978-0-415-59899-6.

This monograph by the distinguished scholar and veteran-specialist in the field of international relations, Peter Berton, is the outcome of his lengthy studies that had already begun in the early 1950s. The book is the recently revised version of his well-known dissertation thesis *The Secret Russo-Japanese Alliance of 1916* (Columbia University, 1956).

First of all, it should be noted that the title of the monograph seems to be somewhat inadequate, because only seven pages of the monograph are devoted to bilateral relations in the pre-war period, and the military, economic and cultural contacts between the countries are mostly omitted