

20 *Kantai Collection* and entertainmentization of the Second World War

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Defeat in the Second World War acted as a kind of memory resetting device in Japan as militarism gave way to narratives of peace and ‘not repeating the mistakes of the past’. However, some places in Japan still preserve and pass on military heritage. This includes the four naval port cities of Kure, Yokosuka, Sasebo, and Maizuru, which were involved in postwar geopolitics in the Asia-Pacific region, and in particular, played a military role during the Korean War. These naval cities generate a contradiction within their postwar memories: on the one hand, they express the Japanese mantra of peace (disconnection with the wartime past), but as active naval cities today they host military forces with the capability to threaten peace (Uesugi 2012; 2014).

Meanwhile, in East Asia since the 2010s, particularly in the worlds of manga, anime, and games, there has been a boom in popular culture contents featuring weapons (see also Chapter 8), and particularly Second World War weapons. *Girls und Panzer* (2012), for example, has high school girls racing Second World War tanks around Ōarai town in Ibaraki prefecture. This triggered both significant contents tourism and controversy due to the collaboration of the Japan Self-Defense Force in some fan events (Yamamura 2019: 13–15). Other contents feature anthropomorphisms of weaponry, particularly weapons personified as *shōjo* (young girls – see Sugawa 2019: 56). Recent examples include the game *Kantai Collection* (2013), featuring anthropomorphisms of Imperial Japanese Navy ships called *kanmusu* (‘ship girls’), and *Shooting Girl* (2015), a similar game to *Kantai Collection* but with anthropomorphisms of guns. In such narrative worlds, fans tend to be attracted to the characters rather than a specific storyline or world view, a phenomenon that Azuma Hiroki (2001) called ‘animalization’ and ‘database consumption’.

Fans, local people, and the Japan Self-Defense Force (SDF) consume or utilize these contents in different ways and for varying motives, but all activities connect back to war memories. Fans visit places that appear in

the contents for two main purposes. Some fans are interested in the war history and visit associated places, while other fans separate the characters from war history and visit places most connected to the characters in the works of entertainment. Local people cooperate with production companies to hold contents-related events with the aim of attracting new forms of tourism, although for some the use of the contents might be considered a ‘cushion’ that softens the passing down of military heritage in a country where the rhetoric of peace is strongly engrained in public discourse. The SDF, meanwhile, can use the popularity of contents to help with public relations (Chapter 22; Yamamura 2019). This chapter explores how war-related contents connect to memories of the Second World War, and how entertainment contents are consumed by fans, regions, and the SDF in naval port cities through the case of *Kantai Collection*.

Kantai Collection (‘Fleet Collection’, hereafter ‘*KanColle*’) is an online PC browser game based on Japanese Imperial Navy warships released in April 2013. It was later adapted into a TV animation and film. In the game the player becomes an ‘admiral’, collects *kanmusu*, and fights against the fictional ‘abyssal fleet’. As the game’s name suggests, the ultimate goal is to collect rare warships rather than win battles. Although it is not made available in East Asia other than in Japan (as it deals with weapons from the Second World War), many Chinese, Korean, and Taiwanese fans use VPN to play *KanColle*. They even hold events and visit related places in Japan and their home countries.

A distinctive feature of *KanColle*-induced tourism is the displacement of war memories at commemorative sites via casual consumption, or the non-contextual consumption of war-related places. An example is *KanColle* fans’ visits to the memorial to the crew of the Japanese cruiser *Naka*, whose name comes from a river in Ibaraki prefecture. *Naka* was sunk by US forces in 1944 with the loss of 240 crew members. There is *chūkonhi* memorial (lit. ‘monument for loyal souls’) for the dead in Ōarai Isosaki Shrine, which is close to the mouth of the *Naka* river. However, in *KanColle* the character *Naka* is not a particularly good ship to receive during the in-game lottery when players collect a ship. This gave rise to a saying among fans, ‘I quit being a fan of *Naka*’ (*Naka no fan wo yamemasu*). However, this aspect of fan behaviour did not just stay within online fan communities. In 2013, some *KanColle* fans went to Ōarai Isosaki Shrine, drew a picture of the character *Naka* on an *ema* (a votive plaque for making a wish at a shrine), and said that they had quit being a fan of hers. The shrine is an actual memorial to the crew of the real ship *Naka* and is visited by bereaved relatives of the crew. Word of this incident spread on social media, and while there were no responses from the

bereaved families, the fan community demanded that the game be separated from reality. A similar incident happened in Kure in January 2019. Some *KanColle* fans visited the Kure Former Naval Cemetery (Nagasaki Park) and put *KanColle* character cards on almost every monument to warships, including the memorial for the crew of the battleship *Yamato*. This behaviour was also heavily criticized on social media.

Meanwhile, local residents, especially in former naval districts, have used *KanColle* as a means of attracting new tourists to the region by collaborating with the production companies. In 2019, Kure city in Hiroshima prefecture and Sasebo city in Nagasaki prefecture held events called ‘130th Kure 2019’ and ‘130th Sasebo 2019’ to commemorate the 130th anniversaries of both cities establishing naval bases during the Meiji period. However, the events were not aimed at the general public, but rather *KanColle* fans. In Kure, there were dances held on two evenings, special live performances by voice actresses, a stamp rally, joint events held with the Yamato Museum and Irifuneyama Memorial, and local restaurants collaborated in the event, too. In Sasebo, cardboard cutouts and images from the anime were placed in the airport, harbour, and around the city, and many people were seen having their pictures taken by them (Sazanami Kaihen 2020). Game-related goods were sold in both cities. At the Sasebo Citizens’ Culture Hall (Former Sasebo Naval District Triumphal Memorial Hall), young women dressed in character costumes gave live performances of *taiko* drumming. Interestingly, in both cities, there were no other official events to commemorate the 130th anniversaries of the naval districts, and these game-related events were the only official events held in which the cities were involved.

The third actor is the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF), which holds various public relations events to promote JMSDF. Some have involved collaborations with *KanColle*. Like many other countries’ navies, JMSDF often names its modern ships using the names of ships from earlier periods of naval history. Consequently, JMSDF promotional events can include vessels bearing the same names as the old Imperial Japanese Navy ships that appear in *KanColle*. One example is the Aegis destroyer *Kongō*, which shares its name with a character in *KanColle*. On 27 April 2019, a special public event for cosplayers was held at Shimonoseki port, where *Kongō* was anchored for three days (Figure 20.1). One of the public events was a special event for cosplayers only, organized by the Self-Defense Forces Yamaguchi Regional Cooperation Headquarters in collaboration with the local cosplay event organizer COSMAI. I participated in this event. An SDF officer guided us around the ships, and for an hour there was a photo shoot event. It was possible to take photos without restrictions on the bridge and the



Figure 20.1 A cosplayer dressed as a *kanmusu* ('ship girl') at a JMSDF public relations event. Author's photo.

front and rear decks, where fans most wanted to take photos. I was one of about 20 cosplayers and photographers who participated, and participants' costumes were mostly of *KanColle* characters.

This chapter has explored some of the ways in which fans, local communities, and the Japan Self-Defense Force are consuming and utilizing contents such as *KanColle*, and the connections to actual memories of the Second World War. The examples of fans leaving *ema* or game cards at actual naval memorial sites in Ōarai and Kure indicate the tensions that can arise when pop culture fans on a 'sacred site pilgrimage' consume monuments commemorating the war dead when wartime comrades and bereaved relatives are still alive. This shines a light on the limitations of entertainmentization of wars within living memory. Although the contents that fans are consuming are fictionalized, they are still connected to actual historical events. If the war becomes decontextualized via entertainmentization, fans and survivors may form very different 'interpretive communities' (Chapter 1) with the potential for significant misunderstandings as they visit the same war-related sites for very different purposes. Furthermore, the involvement of local governments and the SDF

in fan events raises important questions about the ways in which contents-related events can act as a ‘cushion’ in the process of passing down memories of war and military heritage. Do such events simply constitute local people’s desires to take commercial or other advantage of fans’ visits as contents tourists to their communities, or is there a deeper agenda, namely the use of entertainment contents as a smokescreen masking the promotion of a particular political agenda? This is a question Yamamura (2019) has noted for other similar cases of SDF collaborations with anime producers. The case of *KanColle* provides, therefore, a microcosm of the tensions and contestations at the intersections of war memories and war-related entertainment, consumption and commemoration, and remembering and forgetting.

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