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CONTACT! Cultural Impacts of the Australian Post-War Occupation of Japan

This paper examines the post-war Occupation of Japan as a revelatory cultural chapter in the narrative of Australia-Japan relations, which initiated a positive shift in Australian perceptions of a nation that had long been feared and was freshly despised for its wartime misdeeds.

The historical forerunner of its peacekeeping missions and contentious contributions to US-led foreign occupations of recent times, Australia's dominant role in the British Commonwealth Occupation Force constituted a major military endeavour lasting several years (longer than the brutal conflict that preceded it), dwarfing the present commitment in the Middle East, and numerically greater even than that which fought in Vietnam. Proactively participating in the Occupation was the military manifestation of Australia's determination to influence regional affairs in the post-war period; it was also the expression of an overwhelmingly hostile, punitive and even vengeful attitude to its recent enemy.

But what started out as a strictly political and military exercise - signalled by a code of 'non-fraternisation' with the occupied peoples - ended up as a signal marker in bilateral relations, the reverberating cultural impacts of which are still being felt today. The men, women and children of the Occupation (some 500 wives with nearly 600 children in tow made the journey to Japan) were the trailblazers of a new era of Australian engagement with Japan. The oppressive, neo-colonialist aspect of the Occupation was counterbalanced by the readiness of Australians to forego old animosities and make their separate peace with the Japanese. As is well known, the Japanese war brides married to Australian Occupationnaires helped undermine the White Australia Policy. Less appreciated is how the individual Australian encounter with Japan – its language, and both cultural and literal landscapes – led to a rapprochement that in its own intimate way was as significant as the earnest efforts of politicians and diplomats.

This research stems from a major ARC-funded project which, in addition to an analysis of the literary and documentary record bequeathed by the Occupying Force, has been augmented and enlivened by many interviews with Australian veterans and their dependants eager to share their memories and (in most cases) their enduring enthusiasm for Japan.

Robin Gerster is the author of several books, including *Big-noting: The Heroic Theme in Australian War Writing* (1987) and *Legless in Ginza: Orientating Japan* (1999), and has published widely in journals and newspapers both in Australia and abroad. From 1996 to 1998 he held the Visiting Chair in Australian Studies at the University of Tokyo.