The Nature of the Beasts: Empire and Exhibition at the Tokyo Imperial Zoo

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In 1942, as Japanese forces swept through Southeast Asia, retreating British colonial officers decided to shoot the dangerous animals living in Rangoon Zoo and to release the harmless ones. Because of their own uncertain futures and limited supplies, they also killed the Zoo's deer for meat to supplement their increasingly meagre diets. The full extent of these macabre executions are unclear, particularly since British soldiers returning to the abandoned city recalled finding poisonous snakes still resident in what remained of the Zoo, as well as an orang-utan, who had apparently used his new found urban mobility to relocate downtown.⁽¹⁾ This dismantling of an institution that symbolised British imperial reach and scientific advancement was strangely echoed a year later at the heart of what in 1942 was the ascendant, conquering empire. With the rigours of total war putting strain on all areas of everyday life, the decision was taken by ?dachi Shigeo, the newly appointed governor general of Tokyo, to have the animals of Ueno Zoo massacred. But unlike the killings in Rangoon, conducted in panic, amidst rumour and uncertainty, ?dachi arranged a solemn public ceremony to mark the deaths. He had previously been special mayor of occupied Singapore, and had experienced at first hand how dramatically the war had turned against the Japanese. In a political environment where talk of defeat was impossible, the deaths of these animals were intended as a message from ?dachi to the Japanese population at home: they should prepare for further sacrifices. As these events show, the rise and fall of empires was, at times, played out behind the walls and within the cages of the world's zoos.

Ian Miller's enthralling book on the history of the Ueno Zoo traces the shifts in Japanese society from its emergence as imperial power in the 19th century, through total war and American occupation, to becoming a mass consumer culture in the late 20th century. The Zoo was a microcosm in which many of the wider tensions of these periods emerged, particularly the tensions bound up with modern ways of thinking about and interacting with nature. With the coming of what Miller coins 'ecological modernity', the natural world was reconceived as remote from urban life, humans were thought of as having increasing command over nature, and animals were becoming marginal in daily life. However, as Miller demonstrates, this was an ambivalent relationship with nature. As nature became viewed as a place beyond and untouched by human activity and was marginalised, it was also mythologised. The supposed remoteness of the natural world fed a desire to experience it. Nature was made the authentic place of humanity's past. As well as being a didactic

space to educate the populace in scientific knowledge of animals, the Zoo was also an attempt to address this desire for nature. Animals were exhibitions that enabled people to glimpse the natural world that they believed was disappearing from their everyday lives. Through this exploration of the ambivalence of 'ecological modernity', *The Nature of the Beasts* uncovers a great deal about the history of imperialism and the Anthropocene (a concept discussed below) in Japan.

Miller divides the book into three parts that roughly map onto periods in modern Japanese history: imperial; total war; and post-war. These parts each contain two chapters, also arranged chronologically. This structure enables him to examine the changing content, tensions and resonances of Japan's 'ecological modernity' whilst interweaving his narrative with strands of the country's political and cultural histories. The Zoo works as a knot where these threads come together, and the different chapters also examine different events and processes in the institution's life. As a result the book manages to be far-reaching in its historiographic discussions and empirical scope, whilst retaining a clear focus and framework by always returning back to Ueno Zoo.

In the first part of the book Miller tracks the emergence and consolidation of 'ecological modernity' through examining the rise in new conceptualisations of animals and the impulses behind the construction of the Zoo itself. In chapter one, 'Japan's animal kingdom', he traces how the term *d?butsu* came to be used to designate animals as distinct entities from humans through Japanese re-workings of European natural histories during the 19th century. In intellectual circles, the newly defined 'animal' was increasingly the focus of study. Japanese thinkers and scholars' engagements with emergent social evolutionary thought were creative and drew from a range of texts and theories. By the 20th century, zoological and veterinary knowledges were established, and the propagation of self-consciously modern understandings of animals became seen by some Japanese scholars as a matter of urgency. Japan's burgeoning exhibition culture provided a platform for the display of animals, and with it came the building of a zoological gardens in Tokyo's Ueno park, a site that was to be expanded (in part due to its popularity) into the Ueno Zoo. At the Zoo, it was hoped the people of Japan would come to know themselves as modern by seeing the animals and learning about them.

In the second chapter Miller extends this history of Japanese entanglements with Western modernity into an exploration of the intrinsic links between the zoo and empire building. The association between animals and wildness mapped onto the imaginative geography of Japanese imperialism in which ideas of wildness were projected onto their colonies in Asia. This was in part a way of reinforcing the backwardness of the colonised and justifying their own imperial mission, but it was also an ambivalent projection. As Miller succinctly puts it, 'in framing nature as a thing apart, ecological modernity generated its own culture of longing' (p. 91). Zoo-goers wanted to experience the sensuousness of exotic, distant ecologies, but the Zoo could not sate their appetites. The animals were always removed from them. Miller brilliantly uncovers the architectural innovations developed and deployed to give the appearance that animals were within their natural environments and to disguise the barriers between them and their human observers. Nevertheless, being among the animals and their colonised habitats was a fantasy only partially realised at the Zoo. It remained a site for the 'dreamlife of imperialism', as Miller evocatively calls it.

This association between the empire and animal populations was both strengthened and refigured during the 1930s and 1940s. In chapter three, 'Military animals', Miller shows how imperial conflict and the culture of Japanese fascism altered the institution. During the war in China, and later Southeast Asia, visitors to the Zoo were encouraged to see themselves in the animals. Different creatures were intended to represent various hardships on the home front and, through these sympathetic animals, to instil resolve into the visitors. At the same time, the increased deployment of animals during battle led the Zoo to acknowledge animals' military roles. Animal heroes were celebrated and mourned as a way of recognising the costs born by those serving on the front line. As Miller illustrates, animals served as 'surrogates' for those lost in war. Rather than something apart invoking a lost natural world, animals, with their mortality and capacity for pain, were now recognised as familiar and akin to humans.

This 'cult of martial sacrifice' reached its apogee with what Miller calls the 'Great Zoo Massacre', described briefly at the beginning of this review. With sensitivity and compassion, Miller takes us through the layers of meaning involved in this shocking moment in the Zoo's history. The careful arrangement of the ceremony marking what could have been a hidden slaughter, is explained through the desire to perform a sacrifice. The animals were not just killed as a last resort for the practical wartime exigencies of scarcity and safety. Indeed some pragmatic measures suggested by the Zoo's staff as alternatives to the slaughter were not adopted. As well as addressing the material problems of a nation at war, the killings served a symbolic purpose. The animals were made into martyrs, their deaths a warning to the people of Tokyo of the further sacrifices to come. But Miller also discusses the acts involved in the slaughter. He outlines the process by which the method of execution was selected, with strychnine being favoured for many creatures, with its attendant highly visible signs of agony. Starvation was eventually preferred for the Zoo's charismatic elephants, whose sensitivity to human emotional cues contributed to them rejecting poisoned food. Miller also discusses the small acts of non-compliance that Zoo staff used in trying to avoid their dreadful duties. This is an affecting chapter, and it acts as a pivot in the book as the content moves away from empire and towards defeat and reconstruction.

Chapter five begins with the arrival of *Bambi* in post-war Japan. The film was a marker and a manifestation of the American occupation of a defeated Japan, now without its empire. Its central theme of lost innocence resonated with audiences. Miller calls this chapter "The children's Zoo" since this was how the institution was reconstituted in the immediate post-war period. Elements of nostalgia and concern for the future led to the Zoo's new leadership to focus the displays and exhibitions towards educating a new generation. They devised ways of enabling children to interact directly with animals, without the intermediation of their parents. It was hoped that they would learn to be disciplined and considerate through this direct contact, a belief that built on the supposed similarities between animals and children. Within the constrained political and economic environment of the occupation, the Zoo was able to use its orientation towards children in its diplomatic efforts to obtain animals from around the world. Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru's presentation of Indira, an elephant gifted from the children of India to the children of Japan, was a notable success in this strategy.

In the final substantive chapter the geo-politics of animal acquisitions is used to explore Japan's emergence as a mass consumer culture. "Pandas in the Anthropocene" focuses on the distribution, attraction and reproduction of one of the world's most endangered and most charismatic fauna. Receiving two pandas from China marked an important shift in the diplomatic relations between the two countries, without them addressing the unresolved tensions of the imperial past. Once in Japan, pandas proved incredibly popular. Their cuteness, and perhaps humans' pre-cognitive response to their child-like forms, contributed to this craze. They became ubiquitous images, reproduced over and again in myriad consumer goods. Miller brilliantly examines the issues of copyright that emerged, illustrating how legal regimes became entangled in attempts to separate the natural world from the products of human labour. The artificiality of such a division is illustrated through the elaborate interventions made by humans to facilitate the breeding of pandas. These processes are a sign of the still incomplete transition zoos are making globally from places where animals are displayed, to places for the preservation of bio-diversity. It is also a symptom of the Anthropocene played out on a small scale, a reminder that many believe we are in geological epoch defined and determined by the actions of the human species.

Miller's book is important beyond its obvious and substantial contribution to both Japanese history and zoo history. It begins to answer the challenges facing the historical profession, laid out recently by Julia Adeney Thomas, of responding to global climate change and incorporating the biological and the environmental into our histories.⁽²⁾ As Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued, the Anthropocene and climate change are historical problems of such monumental proportions that the difficulties of scale and subjectivity appear almost insurmountable.⁽³⁾ Miller's focus on the Zoo and attention to ideological shifts informed by imperialism, demonstrates that these historical concerns can be successfully explored through a focused study. The book also begins to counterbalance the Eurocentric focus of most animal history to date.⁽⁴⁾ There remains more

work to be done in this regard. After all, Japan was an imperial power, and this was, as Miller amply demonstrates, a salient factor in their culture of ‘ecological modernity’. Our understanding of the history of the Anthropocene will be advanced further as we turn our attentions away from former imperial centres to the post-colonial world. Such an avenue was beyond the scope of Miller’s book, and I do not raise this here as a criticism. Rather, I think that in his exploration of an Asian culture’s history of human-animal relations, Miller provides insights and concepts that will enable future researchers to push further at the geographical and historical limits of current scholarship.

Notes

1. Alan Warren, *Burma 1942: The Road From Rangoon to Mandalay* (London; New York, NY, 2011), p. 145.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Julia Adeney Thomas, “Not yet far enough”, *American Historical Review*, 117, 3 (2012), 794–803. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘The climate of history: four theses’, *Critical Inquiry*, 35, 2 (2009), 197–222. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Some recent exceptions to this include: *JAPANimals: History and Culture in Japan’s Animal Life*, ed. Gregory M. Pflugfelder and Brett L. Walker (Ann Arbor, MI, 2005), which includes a contribution from Ian Jared Miller; *Centering Animals in Latin American History*, ed. Martha Few and Zeb Tortorici (Durham, NC; London, 2013); and Julie E. Hughes, *Animal Kingdoms: Hunting, the Environment, and Power in Indian Princely States* (New Delhi, 2013).[Back to \(4\)](#)

The author is pleased to accept this review. He wishes merely to suggest his fascination with the description of events in Rangoon in 1942 and to underline his strong agreement with the reviewer's drive to expand the scope of such studies within post-colonial societies, well beyond the walls of the European and North American (and Japanese) institutions that sought to define the colonial world for metropolitan audiences.

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