

Interview with Drew McKevitt

Michael Fischer

Drew McKevitt, who received his PhD from Temple University, is the author of *Consuming Japan: Popular Culture and the Globalizing of 1980s America*

Q: What in particular pushed you to study what you study?

A: That's a good question. When I arrived at Temple, I was interested in the Cold War. I wanted to do traditional diplomacy, something to do with the anti-nuclear movement. I came across a 1988 anime film called *Akira* that my brother had. I happened to borrow that film and I was struck by the Cold War resonances in there. It is filled with these anti-nuclear messages and Japan's place in there. And that got me thinking "what is it doing in there, and what does that have to do with the United States?" And that got me thinking about the first American anime fans who started forming fan clubs in the 1970s and 1980s, and connecting with each other through a grass roots, transnational fandom. I use that as a sort of launching point to think about other ways that Americans interacted with Japan in the 1970s and 1980s.

Q: Was there one moment that facilitated the formation of these anime fan clubs?

A: Japanese animation was on American television in the 1960s, but most people didn't recognize it as Japanese. They were things like *Speed Racer* and *Gigantor*, and they were completely de-Japanized. Any association with Japan was erased, Japanese characters were written out. This type of product comes back in the late 1970s through

cheap syndication. Distribution companies are buying up Japanese products, flipping it, and putting it out very quickly. This appealed to teenage and young-adult audiences because it was so different. That got them asking questions. In 1977, the very first anime club is founded in the United States, the Cartoon Fantasy Organization in Los Angeles. It's a combination of Japan's projection of cheap pop culture, and the tools that allow Americans to engage with it, particularly the VCR. It is very much grassroots.

Q: For any readers of *Strategic Visions*, do you have one or two main points for them to take away if they are not able to attend your talk today?

A: The book argues that the U.S.-Japan relationship in the 1970s and 1980s contains a way in which citizens of both countries began to engage in many ways the properties of what we call globalization. We start talking about globalization as a thing in the 1980s. You can't understand how Americans come to understand globalization without considering Japan's contribution to that, including the flow of transnational capital, the role of popular culture, things like that. A kind of corollary to that is while we have been thinking about globalization in nationalistic terms, it has transformed average American's lives in ways we don't normally think of. The celebration of Japanese pop culture or the dozens of Japanese-owned automotive facilities dot the American landscape. It is sort of a counternarrative to this nationalist-globalist dichotomy.

Q: With respect to historiography, where does this fit in? Is there anybody that is talking about these things in particular?

A: No, not really. It is a patchwork of different things, one is the increasing importance of consumption including works by T.H. Breen and Lisabeth Cohen. One person who does it for foreign relations is Kristin Hoganson. Mari Yoshihara wrote a book called *Embracing the East* which is about white women in the United States who are consuming Japanese things by dressing up or decorating their homes in Japanese ways. There are precedents for Americans consuming these Japanese things. The difference by the 1970s and 1980s is the type of things that Americans are consuming. Rather than traditional things such as clothing, it is things that are seen as forward thinking: the VCR, the car, anime. The scale is also much greater. So I was inspired by these things but also by the broader sort of cultural turn in U.S. foreign relations. Obviously working with people like Petra Goedde and Bryant Simon influenced me and gave me very good advice.

Q: What were some of the biggest challenges you faced?

A: One of them is methodological, archival. If your question is “what did the VCR mean to Americans” then what is your archive for that? I still don’t know if I have a good answer for that. I looked to consumer reports and sociological studies and things like that. For each chapter, and the book is kind of a series of case studies built around a series of goods, the challenge was to answer my questions without a more traditional type of

archive. For every chapter, that was a challenge. And then the bigger challenge is a conceptual one. Writing a book like this is an act of creation and doing so is very challenging.

Q: Did you consult any Japanese sources?

A: I didn’t. Part of it is because the difficulty in language, but the other part is that I didn’t really need to. I’m writing a book about consuming Japan. There is another book to be written called “Producing Japan,” and other people are more qualified to write about the Japanese side of it, and have done so.

Q: What is next for you?

A: Lots of things are next. I have two book projects, one I am working on with a co-author. One is a history of the intersection of U.S. foreign relations and U.S. gun violence. This project began for me with coming across a 1992 shooting death of a Japanese exchange student in Baton Rouge, LA. A 16 year old kid, dressed up for Halloween, knocks on a door and is shot to death. His killer is acquitted of manslaughter charges. It becomes an international incident with outrage in Japan. In the aftermath, his host family starts a gun control campaign in cooperation with his parents in Japan, starting a transnational campaign. I want to use that as a launching point for how gun violence in the U.S. intersected with the United States as a world power or a declining world power. That is the next book project.