

Jeffrey W. Alexander, *Japan's Motorcycle Wars: An Industry History* (Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2009) or formally (Vancouver, UBC Press, 2008), ISBN 978-0-8248-3328-2 (pbk.: alk. paper).

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Jeffrey W. Alexander writes a history of the Japanese motorcycle industry with verve and a sense of mission. He aims to fill a void in the field of motorcycle history – both in the Japanese and English speaking academy. Alexander cautions the readers that the book is not about motorcycles or management theories, instead he uses a holistic vision. He charts political, social, and economic factors affecting the efforts of motorcycle entrepreneurs during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Of constant question to Alexander is the matter of how over two hundred motorcycle companies in the aftermaths of the Second World War shrank to four major manufacturers (4).

*Japan's Motorcycle Wars* unfolds chronologically from the late Meiji era (1868-1912) to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Starting at the dawn of Japan's motorcycle industry at the turn of the last century, Chapter 1 relates the government initiatives to establish new road codes and licensing following the advent of motorised vehicles. Alexander argues the government aimed at a mixed traffic society in which the existing transport apparatus such as horse-drawn carriages and rickshaws travelled alongside the motorised options. The chapter tells us about the upgrading of road networks dating back to the Edo period (1603-1868) and the implementation of traffic regulations. Amongst several individuals in this chapter, we meet Shimazu Narazô,<sup>i</sup> the founder of the Miyata Manufacturing Company. He is credited as the creator of the four-stroke engine and Japan's first domestically produced motorcycle. His achievement was the result of much effort as part of a diverse applications for motorized engines. Historians would appreciate Alexander's efforts in taking a holistic view in narrating the development of motorcycles. He explains the rise of motorcycle sports as an incentive for manufacturers to improve the quality of their craft, and to spread the appeal of the motorcycle to the populace. I had held an impression that the Japanese motorsport took root in the postwar era; Alexander's book corrected this assumption.

The motorcycle industry enjoyed steady development during the politically liberal, or less restrictive, Taishô period (1912-26) in which socio-cultural innovations took shape elsewhere in Japan (Chapter 2). This was curtailed when Japan's imperialist ambition resulted in the invasion of Manchuria and all-out war with China. The motorcycle industry benefited from the patronage of the police force for its orders to produce patrol vehicles, but eventually the patronage took on a new form. During wartime the manufacturers had to operate within the restrictions of the military government. The government also encouraged the production of larger motorcycles and under a banner of self-sufficiency the manufacturers had to produce motorcycles with limited raw materials. Here, the Rikuô motorcycle is a telling example as cited by Alexander. Rikuo began in the late Taishô period (1912-26) as a government-backed joint venture with American owned Harley-Davidson. But as the government's self-sufficiency became the official credo, Rikuô had to produce its products without any foreign parts (60). This was a period in which engineers, motorcycle company executives, government and military officials had closer connections. One cannot help but wonder how their personal connections affected the business ventures.

Following Japan's defeat in 1945, the country came under the rule of the U.S.-led Occupation Force. Japanese industry was therefore bound by the prohibition of military productions. Additionally, the availability of loans became tighter as the government was saddled with reparations. Once freed from the payment, some enterprising engineers seized new market opportunities. An oft-told story is the lateral move by Nikon from wartime optic devices manufacturer to cameras. Likewise, the Nakajima Aircraft Manufacturer applied their wartime expertise and turned to producing motorcycles with its flagship product the Rabbit. Another example is Yamaha's foray into the motorcycle after manufacturing looms and musical instruments. Honda and New Fuji went against the big motorcycle production the wartime regime had preferred. Cubs and Rabbits from their respective companies proved to be hit products. The second dawn of the Japanese motorcycle industry saw the birth of over 200 manufacturers. Throughout the postwar decades both the rider population and motorcycle production increased. Motorcycle sports revived after the wartime hiatus and as the road conditions improved over the decades, touring became a leisure activity. But we know that only four manufacturers survived by the 1970s (Honda, Kawasaki, Suzuki and Yamaha). As Alexander demonstrates successful firms survived because they excelled in engineering, mass-production, and securing loans.

A sub-theme in Alexander's work is how some firms survived and others perished as a result of devastating earthquake. The Great Kanto earthquake of 1923 and others did break the neck of many firms. Two years after the publication of the book north-eastern Japan was struck by a catastrophic earthquake and tsunami in March 2011. With this memory still fresh and even reviving that of previous earthquake, Alexander's book gives an unexpected, albeit unfortunate, inspiration for and historical hindsight how companies can re-build themselves. In contrast, Alexander introduces the stories of failed firms as the counter to the glowing success stories of the 'Big Four' and to better illustrate what set those 'winners' and 'losers' apart (Chapter 6). Even amongst the 'losers' that went bankrupt, some survived. Miyata switched to bicycles. Following a few name changes, Nakajima Aircraft settled on Subaru and concentrated on motorcars. Bridgestone abandoned motorcycles and decided on tyre manufacturing. It was poignant that Hodaka motors felt that it was so marginalised that it saw specialising in export market was the way for its survival (190-191). Arresting moments in the book come when Alexander shows us those perished firms were subjected to foul play by others. As an epilogue, the seventh and final chapter discusses motorcycle firms' export strategies and the road safety regulations in attempting to combat road accidents and fatalities. In this chapter, Alexander tells us that Honda management in America focused on the smaller motorcycle market rather than going into direct competition with the domestic and British dominated larger vehicles. Honda also spotted the 'macho outlaw' images of the motorcycle riders, popularised by Marlon Brando's 1953 film *The Wild Ones* (200). Honda in the United States wanted to appeal to a different clientele: young, middle-class, do-gooders. Honda's U.S. strategy involved the 50cc Super Cub. The advertisement "You meet the nicest people on Honda" epitomizes this period and was the product of a Honda and an American advertising agency effort (203). Consequently, Honda rose to prominence in the U.S. market.

Undoubtedly, Alexander's book is a courageous yet smooth ride, but it is not without bumps along the way. One bump is Alexander's explanations for failed firms. Some company directors felt morally obligated to their senior engineers and larger companies, which clipped the wings of the junior firms. Alexander relates this senior-junior relationship to the *ie* system in which, the eldest son in the family is expected

to carry the family name (177). I feel that a different explanation rooted in Japan's feudalistic mentality would be more suited, but the post-war Japanese constitution promulgated a new constitution that heralded, *inter alia*, equality for all, which symbolised the government's stance towards the *ie* system. What seems a more useful explanation to the junior-senior relationships perhaps lies elsewhere.

In the aftermath of Japan's defeat and through the early 1950s, Japanese intelligentsia lamented the enduring shadow of the 'feudalistic mindset' as a key element in Japanese militarism. They argued that the new Japan should overcome this mindset of fascism in order to become a modern democracy. In those early years of postwar Japan, teachers (also precocious school students and university students) sought education as a key to cleanse their wartime imperialist dogma and guilt, and develop their intellect to contribute to the new peaceful era (Oguma). It is doubtful if the paradigm shift occurred amongst those motorcycle manufacturers. They were presumably socialised during the wartime, and possibly imbued with the 'feudalistic mindset. Alexander gives hints, however. Amongst them were Honda Sôichirô's demanding management style, and Honda and Yamaha subduing strikes (123, 146). These examples would inspire industrial relations scholars to study further this aspect of *Japan's motorcycle wars* (Chapters 4 and 5).

Another bump I felt was Alexander's challenge against what he calls the Hamamatsu region myth. He points out that it suggests the region is the cradle and hub of the Japanese motorcycle industry (16, 164-165). Indeed, Alexander's documentation demonstrates motorcycle firms began in many localities. But I was left wondering how the Hamamatsu myth served in the consciousness of the Japanese motorcycle industry and motorcycle enthusiasts. In some cases, regional identity can be forged and asserted as counter-hegemonic expressions against broad nationalism, strongly linked to the industry's host region (Detroit and Toyota City for the motorcar; the Silicon Valley and IT; Switzerland and watches). It may be best left for anthropologists to investigate the power of the regional identity in blunting the awareness of the underbelly of Japan's industrial development.

However, these bumps are minor and do not damage the quality of Alexander's work. His unflagging energy is apparent in his style – both in the main text and his translation of Japanese interviews. The book will appeal to a wide range of scholars and motorcycle enthusiasts who want to learn more of the background to the manufacturers and their founders. It can inspire scholars who wish to draw comparisons with motorcycle histories of other nations. For its significance to Japanese history, Alexander's book is in the vein of the historian John Dower's *Embracing Defeat*, which focuses on the popular experience of the early postwar era. Both historians present alternative 'bottom up' views to postwar Japanese economic and industrial developments that are often narrated from nation-based 'top down' political and economic perspectives. The book has carved out a unique niche in motorcycle historiography (more for the English-language scholars of Japanese history) and will remain a seminal reading in the decades to come.

Works cited:

Dower, John. *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the aftermaths of World War II* (London: Penguin Books, 2000).

Oguma Eiji, 'Minshu' to 'aikoku': *Sengo nihon no nashonarizumu to kokyôsei* ['Democracy' and 'Patriotism': Discourses on nationalism and communality in

postwar Japan] (Tokyo: Shinyôsha, 2002).

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<sup>i</sup> Japanese names feature surname first, followed by given names. I follow this convention. But mine follows the Western order as I am writing in English, and living and working in the English-speaking world.