Assessing the cultural impact of Japan on its empire, especially on that of occupied northeast China, known as Manchukuo between 1932-1945, has been a daunting task for scholars until relatively recently. Often, boundaries of language, nation, and even discipline, hinder the communication among researchers in Japan, China, Korea, Taiwan, North America, and Europe, and limit their access to necessary archives or primary sources. Also, the increasing porousness between the disciplines of history, art history, literary and cultural studies, and political science is opening up new opportunities for transnational collaboration between colleagues interested in unpacking the impact of Japan’s cultural hegemony in Asia, and how it either connected to or remained divorced from the imperial center. Even the physical act of returning home to the archipelago by Japanese soldiers from the Chinese front in slow trickles to the military port of Hiroshima flattened by a US atomic bomb, and the flood of Japanese repatriates from Manchuria arriving back on American ships taking off from Pusan, South Korea, illustrate the various culturally alienating spaces that these individuals confronted when they arrived. Not only had their nation been defeated, but also a culture intended to provide guidance for the multiethnic peoples in Manchukuo and in the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere.

Historical hindsight now renders this initiative hollow, but at the time, Japanese intellectuals and others strongly believed that they were helping to construct a new cultural template that was modern, inclusive, and progressive. In order for scholars to understand the initial cultural vacuum of the postwar, it is imperative to begin with a general analysis of the cultural activities developed by the Japanese in Manchukuo that were to serve as a template in occupied China and soon-to-be conquered areas in Southeast Asia. Within the past decade, transnational attempts to look at these questions have accelerated, with University of British Columbia and Harvard University serving as two hotbeds of new interdisciplinary study by a younger generation on Manchuria/Manchukuo/northeast China or wartime Japanese transnational wartime cultural endeavors. I will talk about the activities of scholars working on these topics and will discuss the example of Yamada Seizaburô as a writer whose career exemplifies the shift in cultural and political alliances between the 1930s and 1950s, transcending wartime and postwar.

Professor Annika A. Culver was educated at the University of Chicago, Harvard University, and Vassar College. She also serves as a scholar in Cohort II of the US-Japan Network for the Future. Her research interests include Manchuria/Manchukuo, Japanese cultural imperialism, politics and the arts in East Asia, propaganda/advertising/gender and consumption, Sino-Japanese relations, and US-Japan relations.

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