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Asia and Postwar Japan: Deimperialization, Civic Activism, and National Identity

A hybrid *u:japan* lecture by Simon Avenell

Thursday
2025-11-06
18⁰⁰~19³⁰



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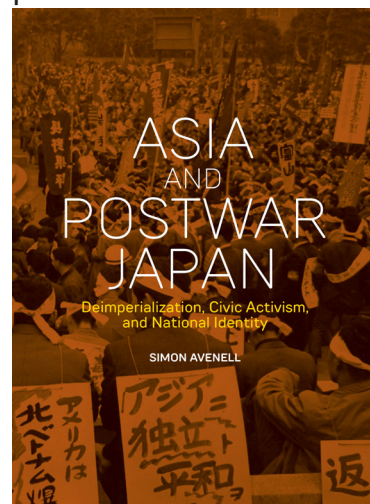
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War, defeat, and the collapse of empire in 1945 touched every aspect of postwar Japanese society, profoundly shaping how the Japanese would reconstruct national identity and reengage with the peoples of Asia. While “America” offered a vision of re-genesis after cataclysmic ruin, “Asia” exposed the trauma of perpetration and the torment of ethnic responsibility. Obscured in the shadows of a resurgent postwar Japan lurked a postimperial specter whose haunting presence both complicated and confounded the spiritual rehabilitation of the nation.

In this presentation Simon Avenell will discuss his book, *Asia and Postwar Japan: Deimperialization, Civic Activism, and National Identity* (Harvard Asia Center, 2022). The book examines processes of deimperialization in Japan from 1945 until the early twenty-first century. It focuses on the thought and activism of progressive activists and intellectuals as they struggled to overcome rigid preconceptions about “Asia,” as they

grappled with the implications of postimperial responsibility, and as they forged new regional solidarities and Asian imaginaries. The book aims to reveal the critical importance of Asia in postwar Japanese thought, activism, and politics—Asia as a symbolic geography, Asia as a space for grassroots engagement, and ultimately, Asia as an aporia of identity and the source of a new politics of hope.



Simon Avenell is director of the ANU Japan Institute and professor at the Australian National University. He specializes in modern Japanese history, society, and politics. Along with numerous articles, chapters, and edited volumes, his scholarly works include *A History of Postwar Japan: Recovery, Prosperity, and Transformation* (Hawaii 2025), which tells the epic story of Japan from 1945 to the present; *Asia and Postwar Japan: Deimperialization, Civic Activism, and National Identity* (Harvard Asia Center 2022), which analyzes Japan's complicated reengagement with Asia after colonial empire and militarism; *Transnational Japan in the Global Environmental Movement* (Hawaii 2017), an exploration of Japanese activists' role in environmental movements worldwide from the 1960s; and *Making Japanese Citizens* (California 2010) a history of civic thought and activism in postwar Japan. He is currently researching the history of youth, aging, and generation in contemporary Japan.

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