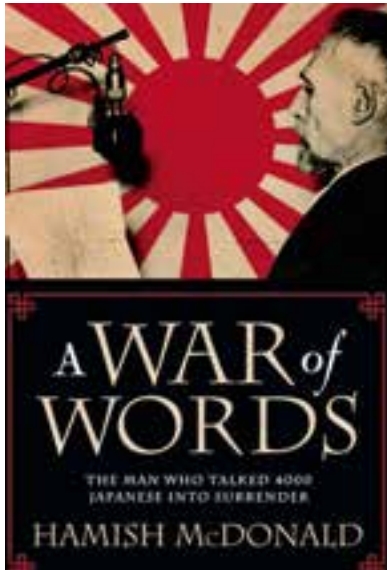


# Book Review



**Hamish McDonald**, *A War of Words: The Man Who Talked 4000 Japanese into Surrender*, (Queensland: University of Queensland Press), 2014, 332 pages.

By **Jeria Kua**

## INTRODUCTION

“The War of Thought is as important as that of armed might or economy.”

- *Unknown Japanese army officer*<sup>1</sup>

In his latest book, author and journalist Hamish McDonald presents a riveting account of the extraordinary life of Charles Bavier – born a European but raised as a Japanese at the tumultuous turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Set during a period of a rapidly-changing world order, this book traces Bavier’s epic journey across Asia, including the 1911 Xinhai Revolution that ended 2,000 years of imperial rule in China, the Australia and New Zealand Army Corps’ (ANZAC) 1915 Gallipoli Campaign, the British MI5’s counter-intelligence operations in Southeast Asia, culminating in his indispensable role as a skilled propagandist for the Allies in World War Two’s (WWII)

Pacific Theatre. After over 30 years of research, McDonald has crafted an engaging historical narrative of a man whose *sui generis* cultural background enabled him to play an integral role in persuading an estimated 4,000 Japanese soldiers in the Southwest Pacific to surrender, and indirectly saving countless more lives. Through Bavier’s story, readers are given an insight into the numerous trials and tribulations he faced in his quest for glory, as well as his unyielding desire to promote harmony between the two worlds of East and West.

## AN EASTERN UPBRINGING

Charles Souza Bavier was born in January 1888 to a Swiss silk businessman Edouard de Bavier and his unknown European lover, amidst Japan’s reopening of trade with the West after over 200 years of *sakoku*, or self-imposed isolation.<sup>2</sup> Abandoned by his

biological parents immediately after birth, Bavier was entrusted to the care of his father's Japanese mistress in the port city of Yokohama. Over the next 20 years, he was brought up in a Japanese milieu under the name 'Sakai Hachisaburo,' and "never felt anything but Japanese until he was much older," with only his fair complexion and brown hair betraying his European heritage.<sup>3</sup>

From his early childhood, Bavier displayed a keen interest in military affairs and yearned for a career in the army. He read voraciously about famous military commanders and explorers like Napoleon and Columbus, practised *kendo* diligently, and drilled with the school cadet corps wherein he was appointed as a non-commissioned officer.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, his fascination with war and conflict mirrored the growing current of Japanese nationalism in society, which was intensified by the nation's decisive victory in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) and its disputes with Russia over territorial claims in the Liaodong Peninsula. Militarism permeated the education of young men like Bavier, where they were taught to embody "the spirit of Japan's warlike ancestors," and that "the military were the expression of the national 'essence'."<sup>5</sup>

As the story begins to unfold, McDonald adroitly captures the zeitgeist of a nation craving for international prestige and imperial power through the careful use of language and evocative detail, despite the large amount of historical material covered. He is also able to induce feelings of sympathy on the part of the reader for Bavier and his estranged adoptive mother when he was neglected by his father, as well as reflect the tension between Bavier's Swiss ethnicity and the increasing distrust of foreigners in Japan, thus setting the stage for conflict.

### ALIENATION AND REVOLUTION

Bavier's transition to adulthood in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was no less fraught with suspense. Japan was engulfed in a bitter and protracted war with Russia from 1904-1905, fanning into flames the embers of anti-foreign, nationalistic sentiment all over the country. Indiscriminate attacks on foreigners were not uncommon, while the assassination of politicians seen capitulating to foreign powers was viewed as an act of loyalty to the emperor.<sup>6</sup> As the socio-political environment of Japan became darker and more chaotic, the author subtly criticises the corruption of the *bushido* spirit, now used as *carte*

*blanche* for fanatical violence and racism.

Bavier himself, now an undergraduate student at the Waseda School of Commerce in Tokyo, had nearly fallen victim to one of these attacks during the Hibiya Riot of 5<sup>th</sup> September, 1905—a violent protest against the unsatisfactory peace treaty terms that concluded the war.<sup>7</sup> In what would prove to be a turning point in his life, he was rescued by the revolutionary activist Miyazaki Toten, a close aide of Sun Yat-sen, and became immersed in the Chinese revolutionary movement growing in Tokyo. With his thirst for adventure and military glory stirred, he attended the meetings of the radical socialist elements in the city and joined the *Tongmenghui*, a revolutionary body dedicated to overthrowing the Manchu rule in China. Believing in his calling to be on the battlefield, he left school and set sail for China.

Caught in the throes of military uprising and political upheaval, the late Qing Dynasty China was truly a kaleidoscope of conflict and turmoil. Due to the chaotic nature of this period, McDonald manipulates the flow of time in the narrative, speeding it up and slowing it down to emphasise key events, thus sustaining the

reader's interest. Bavier travelled from city to city, helping to garner logistical support for the insurgency and assisting communication among the various revolutionary groups. He joined a medical team bringing Chinese casualties out of Hanyang, gave tuition in the Japanese and English languages, drilled with the international volunteer corps, and was nearly involved in an assassination attempt on Yuan Shikai, the commander of the Beiyang Army and Prime Minister of Imperial China.<sup>8</sup> Despite the success of the revolution in 1911, Bavier failed to gain any recognition for his contributions. Disappointed but not dispirited, he set out to "fulfil the destiny he felt was waiting" in the newly-formed ANZAC.<sup>9</sup>

### IN THE TRENCHES OF GALLIPOLI: FIGHTING WITH THE ANZAC

Military glory, however, would once again elude Bavier in the miserable, plague-infested trenches of Lone Pine. Characteristic of many of the battles fought during World War One (WWI), the Australians failed to gain significant ground against the Turks during the 1915 Gallipoli Campaign and a fruitless stalemate ensued. Obvious to him that he was on the losing side, the freshly-minted Sergeant felt disillusioned with the Allied commanders' lack

of strategic depth and their failure to use the element of surprise to their advantage—a tactic stressed upon during his studies of Sun Tzu and Clausewitz. Raising this to his superiors, he was accused of spreading disaffection among the soldiers and was harshly upbraided.<sup>10</sup> Nor would his unique background endear himself to his fellow men and officers. Australia at that time was deeply fearful of enemy spies and especially Japan, which had altered the regional balance of power following the 1902 Anglo-Japanese Treaty of Alliance.<sup>11</sup> Bavier himself was suspected of being an informant for the Japanese and was regarded with distrust. A laceration to his face after merely 3 weeks in combat was what delivered the *coup de grace* to his military career, sending him back to Japan with nothing but shame.

### SWITCHING SIDES

Back in his homeland, a new wave of change had enveloped the nation. The boom years of WWI had spread affluence and prosperity among the urban middle class in Japan, driving consumerism and a voracious appetite for all things Western.<sup>12</sup> Now in his thirties with his thirst for adventure cooled, Bavier began to settle down and seek a stable life. He married a Japanese

woman in 1920 and flourished briefly as an English teacher and foreign expert. He even enjoyed the status of a minor celebrity, writing articles on Japanese culture for newspapers, giving broadcast talks over the radio and appearing on public discussions.<sup>13</sup> As always, the author's use of vibrant imagery helps draw readers into the fevered atmosphere of cultural experimentation and dynamism, as well as its precipitous decline following the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1<sup>st</sup> September, 1923.

The sheer carnage wrought by the disaster shook the public mood and exposed the deep fissures within society. People found scapegoats in Koreans and the radical elements in the city, while feelings of fear and confusion were manipulated by ultra-nationalistic conservatives within the military sphere. Compounded by the Great Depression in 1929, the assassinations and fanatical violence of the first decade returned. Japan became increasingly isolationist. Public sentiment began to turn against Bavier too, who received threats and was constantly kept under surveillance by the secret police.

The increasingly hostile state of affairs saw him and his family flee firstly to Hong Kong, and then colonial Singapore in 1938, where he eventually found

work under Colonel Hayley Bell, the head of station for the MI5. Disturbed by Japan's growing militarism with the outbreak of war in China, Bavier operated as an undercover agent for the British, gathering intelligence about Japanese movements in Singapore under the guise of an education consultant to Raffles College. In what would foreshadow his future role in ending the war, he also worked as a propagandist under the Information Ministry, broadcasting commentaries exaggerating Singapore's defences with the aim of sowing doubt in the Japanese minds about attacking the British naval base.

Of particular interest to readers would be McDonald's account of the fall of Singapore, considered then to be an impregnable military fortress. Although Bavier had personally uncovered the Japanese strategy of a *blitzkrieg*-like attack from the Malayan peninsula rather than a naval battle, hubris and complacency had permeated the top brass of military officials. Despite his team's efforts in pointing out Singapore's vulnerability, Colonel Bell was admonished for "causing unnecessary alarm and weakening morale," and was eventually replaced.<sup>14</sup> By the time the British finally began strengthening the

island's defences, it was too little and too late.

### A WAR OF WORDS

Impressed by his achievements in the MI5, Bavier was recruited to join the new Far Eastern Liaison Office (FELO) in Brisbane, the military propaganda section of the Allied Intelligence Bureau.<sup>15</sup> With the war in the Pacific now in full swing, he thus began his 3-year long assault on Japanese morale. Inspired by Sun Tzu's precept of achieving victory without fighting by dispiriting the enemy's troops ahead of battle, Bavier pioneered a new line of propaganda playing on the Japanese soldiers' feelings of nostalgia and homesickness. He and his team designed and air-dropped leaflets containing nostalgic scenes of home, reminding them of loved ones eagerly awaiting their safe return. FELO units were also sent to the frontlines to broadcast Bavier's pre-recorded exhortations to surrender, the oral testimonies of Japanese prisoners, and even traditional music from home. The impact of the propaganda campaign was tangible: the stream of prisoners gradually rose, many of whom attested their motivation to surrender to the FELO leaflets. Bavier's broadcasts had reportedly disturbed Japanese authorities so much that they banned their

soldiers from listening.<sup>16</sup> By the end of the war, 4,160 Japanese soldiers were saved as a result of FELO's efforts, not including the countless Allied lives they might have taken if they had persisted fighting.<sup>17</sup>

So what was Bavier's significance in all of this? It was his masterful command of the Japanese language, deep cultural penetration and knack for military strategy that allowed him to craft the leaflets and broadcasts persuading these soldiers to think about an alternative to blind sacrifice to their emperor and nation.<sup>18</sup> Although there were many second-generation Japanese-Americans working for FELO who were fluent in the language, they were already "Americans in a Japanese skin," lacking the literary skills and vernacular to connect culturally with the Japanese audience.<sup>19</sup> It was ultimately Bavier who added authenticity to FELO's propaganda campaign and propelled its success.

Yet, Bavier was not alone in the fight. He was joined by an eclectic crew of linguists, intelligence experts, military personnel and even defected soldiers from the Japanese Army who had a vital role to play in the conceptualisation of the FELO leaflets. Even the final figure of

roughly 4,000 Japanese soldiers who surrendered was attributed to FELO as a whole and not solely to Bavier. It is therefore important to recognise that the propaganda campaign was fundamentally a team effort.

McDonald's portrayal of the Allied propaganda war with Japan gives us a valuable insight into one of the less documented battlefields of WWII. Underneath the dehumanised and vicious fighting, we learn that these soldiers were all fundamentally human, each with their own unique background, hopes and ambitions. Bavier's story encourages us to appreciate our similarities instead of focusing on our differences. With his life spent caught between the two worlds of East and West, he is no doubt a living testimony to inter-cultural peace.

## CONCLUSION

It is easy to view Charles Bavier as a tragic and flawed character. He was abandoned by his biological family, alienated by the country he grew up in, and regarded as a spy by the Allied Forces. His aspirations of a glorious military career ended in ignominy, both in revolutionary China and the trenches of Gallipoli. Moreover, he was described by his stepson as an "inveterate philanderer,"

who possessed numerous sexual relationships during his early days and an extramarital affair later.<sup>20</sup>

Yet, in the final assessment, what can we learn from Bavier's long and eventful life? Despite his numerous setbacks and ostracism as a "yellow man inside a white skin," Bavier always looked beyond his present circumstances, and sought to use his literary skills and deep understanding of the Japanese psyche "to preach that better mutual understanding would lessen the tensions between Japan and the Western powers," and to "educate the Western nations about the depth of (Japan's) culture and artistic accomplishments."<sup>21</sup>

Or perhaps, it was precisely because of his unique upbringing, coupled with his strength of character, that he was able to prevail in the hour of need as the bridge between the East and West, as exemplified by his role in the saving of thousands of Japanese lives in WWII that would have been lost for naught.

The book is not without its criticisms, however. McDonald employs a novelistic manner of storytelling, which although enriches the narrative may compel readers to question its

veracity. Bavier's attempted autobiography, the main source of material for McDonald, contained "scraps of biographical anecdotes (that) came in no particular order," meaning that certain conversations and scenes had to be imagined from the author's point of view rather than based on Bavier's own testimony.<sup>22</sup> For example, in depicting colonial Singapore in the 1930s, McDonald pictured "glossy blue-black crows (clawing) and (jostling) in a frangipani tree covered in white flowers...From a bamboo cage hanging on the verandah, a large black bird with a bright yellow beak and wattle let out a piercing shriek."<sup>23</sup> While this helps to inject life and colour into Bavier's world and fill in the gaps in his story, it is dramatised to some extent. For a man who kept much of his life a secret, perhaps we should exercise due caution when reading this book.

Overall, *A War of Words* remains an enjoyable read and is highly recommended for those who wish to gain an insight into the psychological dimension of war, as well as the complex relationships among the disparate nations of Asia during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. 🌐

## ENDNOTES

1. Gilmore, Allison B., *You Can't Fight Tanks with Bayonets: Psychological Warfare against the Japanese Army in the South West Pacific* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 9.
2. McDonald, Hamish, *A War of Words: The Man Who Talked 4000 Japanese into Surrender* (Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2014), 13.
3. *Ibid.*, 20.
4. *Ibid.*, 52, 46
5. *Ibid.*, 55.
6. *Ibid.*
7. "Social Protest in Imperial Japan: The Hibiya Riot of 1905", (MIT Visualizing Cultures, 2011), [http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/social\\_protest\\_japan/index.html](http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/social_protest_japan/index.html).
8. Michael Yang, "Yuan Shikai", (*China Highlights*, 2015), <http://www.chinahighlights.com/travelguide/china-history/yuan-shikai.htm>.
9. McDonald, Hamish, *A War of Words: The Man Who Talked 4000 Japanese into Surrender* (Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2014), 121.
10. *Ibid.*, 141.
11. *Ibid.*, 122, 125.
12. *Ibid.*, 154.
13. *Ibid.*, 156.
14. *Ibid.*, 214.
15. Peter Dunn, "Far Eastern Liaison Office (FELO) Military Propaganda Section: Section "D" of Allied Intelligence Bureau (AIB) in Australia During WW2", (*Australia@War*: 2006), <http://www.ozatwar.com/sigint/felo.htm>.
16. McDonald, Hamish, *A War of Words: The Man Who Talked 4000 Japanese into Surrender* (Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2014), 336.
17. *Ibid.*, 275.
18. *Ibid.*, 315.
19. *Ibid.*, 250.
20. *Ibid.*, 311.
21. *Ibid.*, 82, 198, 152.
22. *Ibid.*, 7.
23. *Ibid.*, 196.