

# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

### REVIEW ESSAY

---

#### **Fighting Mothers, Suffering Mothers: Wartime Mixed Media and Postwar Female Cinematic Icons**

Kyu Hyun Kim, University of California, Davis

Hikari Hori. *Promiscuous Media: Film and Visual Culture in Imperial Japan, 1926–1945*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018. 312 pp. \$55 (cloth).

Jennifer Coates. *Making Icons: Repetition and the Female Image in Japanese Cinema 1945–1964*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2017. 244 pp. \$65 (cloth).

Reading through Hikari Hori's *Promiscuous Media* and Jennifer Coates's *Making Icons*, I was reminded of a scene in Ozu Yasujiro's beautiful and elegiac film *Equinox Flower* (*Higan-bana*, 1958). Hirayama (portrayed by Saburi Shin), a middle-aged Tokyo businessman, is having a conflict with his young daughter Setsuko (Arima Ineko), who has defied his will by deciding to marry a young man of her choice. His wife Kiyoko (Tanaka Kinuyo) first gently and then forcefully attempts to change her husband's mind. At one point, Hirayama's family visits a park and spends a relaxing time together. Kiyoko, smiling but contemplative, brings up memories of their hard life in a bomb shelter during the final stages of the Pacific War:

- Kiyoko: I thought, if we die in the bunker, we would all be together like this. Do you remember?
- Hirayama: I do remember.
- Kiyoko: Of course, I hated the war, but sometimes I miss those days. How about you?
- Hirayama: I don't. That was the worst time of my life. We had nothing to live on. And the idiots were throwing their weight around.
- Kiyoko: But for me, it was a good time. We have never been so close as a family since then.

This almost casual exchange between the husband and wife allows Ozu to touch upon the complex, ambivalent, and multi-vocal nature of Japanese wartime memory in the early postwar period, when Japan was just coming out from under the Allied Occupation (1945–1952) and heading into the era of economic superpower after the Tokyo Olympics (1964). Of course, despite the passage of more than seventy years, the problems of wartime memory and war guilt are far from having been resolved for contemporary Japanese, or for the formerly colonized or semicolonized peoples of Taiwan, Korea, China, and Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, the English-language studies of Japanese culture and society in 1930s and 1940s have recently made significant strides in revising our view of wartime (and immediate postwar) Japanese lives (see Ruoff 2010; Uchiyama 2013; Yoshimi 2016; Pennington 2015; Igarashi 2016). These studies challenge the still-prevalent views, originating from the Allied Occupation’s narrative justifying its reforms, of wartime Japanese society neatly bifurcated between the oppressed masses (and a handful of antifascist resisters) and the oppressive militarist government. Today, wartime Japan appears less and less like a culturally barren landscape—wherein state propaganda held complete sway over every single Japanese with such horrifying slogans as “One Hundred Million Jewels Shattering” (*Ichioku sō-gyokusai*)—than a churning vat of massively variegated, multivalent social and cultural forces adjusting to, and even flourishing under, the tough wartime conditions and in constant contestation, negotiation, and collusion with the state apparatuses. Likewise, the disjuncture between wartime and postwar Japan does not seem as clear-cut as it used to be, as many surprising and troubling continuities between two eras have been excavated and examined, even in the realms of popular culture.

Hori Hikari’s and Jennifer Coates’s books continue this welcome trend in their own distinctive ways. Hori looks into a series of popular cultural media works in the prewar period (1926–1945), whereas Coates is concerned mostly with early postwar cinema, from roughly 1945 until the late 1960s. Hori provides a series of dense, contextually well-informed readings of some key texts from a media studies perspective. Coates employs an art historical approach of iconographical studies to analyze a prodigious number of film titles from the immediate postwar period. She zeroes in on the imagery of iconic women in these films—the suffering mother, the rehabilitated “modern girl,” sexualized housewives who dangerously overlap with postwar *panpan* (sex workers), and so on—setting aside the standard auteur-minded, formalistic, or ideologically inclined approaches.

Hori's provocative study explicitly rejects the very notion of the dichotomy between "state propaganda" (in terms of cinema, *kokusaku eiga*, or "state policy films") and works imbued with the spirits of artistic-heroic "resistance" that by evoking universal human truths attempted to resist imposition of the warlike state ideologies. She brings a fresh perspective to understanding the popular culture of prewar Japan, demonstrating that not only various forms of media—photography, documentary films, animation, and melodramatic films—but also a wide range of tropes, techniques, and styles of these works from various sources, including those produced by the alleged enemies (such as the Walt Disney studio), *promiscuously* influenced and transformed one another in wartime Japan. Hori uses the word "promiscuity" to signify the phenomena of "intermediality" among the different types of media and arts, cross-genre fluidity, and transnational sharing of styles, theories, and themes, which ultimately resulted in the "failure of attempts to establish national identity" for the wartime Japanese state, attesting to "the inherent bricolage of political and formalistic manifestations of any such identity" (1).

Although Hori is respectful of previous studies of Japanese wartime culture that tend toward distillation or clarification of the overarching ideologies or aesthetics, such as Alan Tansman's (2009) study of Japanese "fascist aesthetics" redolent of "melancholic tonality," she nonetheless stands apart from them, stressing the transnational hybridity, if you will, of Japanese wartime popular culture. A Japanese wartime film might borrow equally from a Leni Riefenstahl documentary and a Busby Berkeley musical revue. Likewise, Japanese spectators did not simply "believe in" or "reject" such a product based on its overt ideological contents but derived from it complex sets of pleasures that might not have been the objective of the state or the censors. Hori's book ambitiously tackles different genres of popular media, some of which overlap in form and consumption patterns. These include the mass-circulated "True Visages" (*go-shin'ei*) of the emperor (referred to by Hori as "the Photograph"), so-called women's films, the particular prewar type of documentaries designated as "cultural films" (*bunka eiga*), and, finally, feature-length Japanese animation films.

Hori's analysis of the Photograph in chapter 1 displays its close relationship with more recent accomplishments in the field of cultural and social histories of prewar Japan. Indeed, her investigation starts with sociologist Yoshimi Shun'ya's (2003, 239) insight that "the modern emperor system is nothing other than configuration of various media in which the effects of the emperor's body, whether or not it is present, converge at the level of the nation" (25). Hori

explores the Japanese state's contradictory impulses that represented the emperor as a ritualized, "invisible" presence who must not be gazed upon and, at the same time, as a very visible "star" of emerging mass media whose popularity was sustained by his corporeality. There is a large body of Japanese-language works on the representation of emperors from Meiji to Showa, and chapter 1 has some trouble containing and managing this immense volume of academic discourse. It might have been better if Hori had dispensed with some of the materials dealing with the Meiji Emperor (for instance, she relies on Takashi Fujitani's Foucauldian interpretation of the Meiji-period emperor system, but his theories make more sense in terms of the post-1930s version of the "no-gaze" policy regarding the Photograph than for the Meiji period) and focused more on the disruptive examples regarding the Crown Prince Hirohito/Showa Emperor that resisted the ritualistic, surveilled viewing of the emperor's representation (63–69). Curiously, unlike the other chapters, chapter 1 ends with the impression that the state more or less "won" control of how the emperor was supposed to be seen and understood by the people. Was this really the case?

The rest of *Promiscuous Media* is quite dazzling in its extensively contextualized readings of key filmic texts, some of which have generated controversies as to their true (political) meanings. In chapter 2, Hori looks into a group of "women's films" produced in the interwar and wartime periods, most importantly *A Mother's Music* (*Haha no kyoku*, 1937), *The Love-Troth Tree* (*Aizen katsura*, 1938), *The Army* (*Rikugun*, 1944), *The Most Beautiful* (*Ichiban utsukushiku*, 1944), and *Three Women in the North* (*Kita no sannin*, 1945). Reading these films against conventional interpretations, Hori highlights their cross-cultural intertextuality (particularly with Hollywood films of the era), as well as active elements of wish-fulfilling fantasy that go against the grain of wartime conceptualizations of women. The heroines of *The Love-Troth Tree* and *Three Women in the North* are fascinatingly contrasted with the more conventional characterization of contemporary women as "modern girls" in Mizoguchi Kenji's films; this spectator-centered perspective is shared by Coates in some of her analyses. In particular, Hori's reading of Kinoshita Keisuke's *The Army*, a seemingly impeccable pro-military propaganda film that nonetheless has persistently drawn "defensive" readings of it as "pacifist," cuts through this Gordian knot of the "Is it militarist or not?" question, calling to attention the inherently ambiguous nature of motherhood in the wartime period. Mothers were expected to be "stay-at-home" and passive, yet they also were compelled to become social agents capable of

sustaining the wartime economy. This contradiction is perfectly captured in the character of Waka (Tanaka Kinuyo) in *The Army*. Moreover, that film's famously tear-jerking farewell scene, instead of characterizing Waka as a mere victim of the wartime regime or, conversely, a cog in the wheel of the militarist machine, restores her agency through reciprocation of her son to her emotional gesture in the melodramatic mode (97). This is by far the most nuanced and persuasive interpretation of *The Army* that I have read in any language.

Departing from the usual director-centered approach, Hori chooses to focus in chapter 3 on the scenarist-producer Atsugi Taka (1907–1998), the translator of the highly influential 1935 treatise on documentary by Paul Rotha. Carefully examining Atsugi's written texts along with multiple versions of the documentaries made from her scenarios, especially *The Record of a Daycare Worker* (*Aru hobo no kiroku*, 1942), Hori illustrates how the Japanese documentarian complicated the cinematic text beyond the wartime Japanese state's agenda of promoting domestically confined motherhood. Comparing *The Record of a Daycare Worker* to the well-known British documentary *Housing Problems* (1935), Hori notes that the "ordinariness" imbued in Atsugi's representation of Japanese women underscored their agency as social members rather than their status as subjects of state mobilization policies. Discussing this and other documentaries produced by Atsugi, such as *This Is How Hard We Are Working* (*Watashitachi wa konna ni hatarite iru*, 1945), Hori unspools those qualities that are seemingly complacent about the objectives of wartime state mobilization yet cannily expose the internal contradictions of those objectives (having to "push" working women and mothers out of the domestic spheres in which the state nonetheless has wanted them to remain). Hori's astute observation puts Atsugi's subsequent postwar frustrations in a much more illuminating context than would have otherwise been possible. Instead of simply working "for" or "against" the totality of prewar Japanese norms and behaviors, Atsugi is shown attempting to chart her own course toward recording gender equality, or the lack thereof, in Japanese society, and intervening into "reality" through such acts of recording.

Chapter 4 features, again, the most analytically incisive interpretation I have read of Japan's first feature-length animated film, *Momotarō: The Sacred Sailor* (*Momotarō umi no shinpei*, 1945), directed by Seo Mitsuyo (1911–2010). Hori eschews an impressionistic reading of the allegedly "pacifist" messages coded into the film as well as a dismissive categorization of it as lavishly mounted pro-military propaganda. Through careful contextual research, she

delineates the cross-media influences on Seo's controversial film, including the Fleischer Studios cartoons, Walt Disney's *Fantasia* (1940), special-effects recreations of the Pearl Harbor attack in the hit war film *Sea Battles of Hawaii and Malaya* (1943), and, finally, Wan Laiming and Wan Guchan's *Princess Iron Fan* (*Tie shan gong zhu*, 1941). Hori shows how a seemingly throwaway scene of dandelion seeds spreading in the wind, later associated with a vista of paratroopers descending, and other detailed animated scenes in the film, work against the invocation of "fighting spirits" in individual characters codified into live-action pro-military films. Momotarō's underling Monkey, momentarily mesmerized by the beauty of dandelions spreading, and other painstakingly animated characters such as rabbit soldiers, exude "humaneness and ordinariness," allowing for "artistic moments" that shut out the ideological impositions of pro-war propaganda but at the same time inexorably tie them to the everyday experience of war shared by their intended spectators (200–201).

Jennifer Coates's *Making Icons*, like chapters 2 and 3 of Hori's book, deals extensively with gendered representations in popular visual media and spectator responses to the persistent repetition of certain tropes, narratives, and characterizations in these works. Having covered a large number of postwar Japanese films (the blurb for the book claims that six hundred titles were consulted), Coates argues that certain iconographic representations of women, usually embodied by well-known stars such as Tanaka Kinuyo, Hara Setsuko, and Takamine Hideko, repeatedly declare themselves in these films, in a manner analogous to the way religious icons of the Virgin Mary or Christ repeatedly appear in premodern European visual arts. Coates then ties the popularity of these iconic images of women—suffering mothers, housewives, schoolgirls, and sex workers—to the trauma of the defeat in the Pacific War and subsequent occupation by the Allied Powers. As she argues, drawing upon Félix Guattari, Gilles Deleuze, Dominick LaCapra, and, most interestingly, Yoshimoto Takaaki's theory of "collective fantasy" (*kyōdō genzō*), "troubling emotions and feelings often described as unrepresentable [*sic*], including traumatic memories of the recent war or fear of an unknown future" (5), could then be "worked out" through the affective responses generated through repeated contacts with these iconic images, one of the reasons that the contemporary viewers continued to flock to them despite their predictability.

Coates's contextually rich—she makes use of mainstream critical responses in high-culture journals like *Kinema junpō* but also of "lowbrow" magazines devoted to industry gossip

and fandom, such as *Eiga fan* and *Eiga goraku*—and intertextual readings of these films steer our attention from their overt or covert ideological “messages” to the iconic presentation of the female characters themselves and the issue of embodiment by specific actresses—in a word, stars. Indeed, the achievements of Hori and Coates in their respective volumes strongly suggest that “star studies” is a field urgently needed to properly understand Japanese (and East Asian) cinema (see Dyer 2004). In this regard, I find it particularly fascinating that Coates seems to suggest that the “unruly” nature of Hara Setsuko’s stardom—a “Goddess” who represented modernity and the “bourgeois common sense” of the postwar democracy, as famously suggested by the critic Satō Tadao (Satō and Yoshida 1975, 205, quoted on 55)—perhaps prevented her from dominating postwar star iconography as did her competitors Tanaka Kinuyo and Takamine Hideko. Her analysis is tantalizingly suggestive but not really conclusive. What image did female Japanese viewers see in Hara Setsuko? Was she truly too Western-looking and unrealistic (in other words, she did not look like an ordinary Japanese, either in terms of ethnic or class identities) to serve as an identification figure for Japanese female viewers? In a related question, Coates merely hints at the ability of Misora Hibari to overcome anxieties about her ethnicity (the persistent rumor that she was Korean) and gender (a deliberately androgynous star personality), presumably unlike Hara, to maintain her stardom in the public eye. I could have learned more from an expanded analysis of how these anxieties have played into constructing Misora’s unique star personality.

Throughout her study, Coates provides a series of interpretations of well-known cinematic texts that challenge the accepted wisdom in varying degrees of urgency and precision. For instance, she carefully deconstructs the overwhelmingly positive appraisal by Satō and other critics of the mother character portrayed in Kinoshita Keisuke’s *Tragedy of Japan* (*Nihon no higeki*, 1953), noting that the images of mother in the film actually induce ambivalent affective responses, pity mixed with disgust, thereby reminding the viewers of the uneasy contradiction of prewar motherhood in that she had been victimized by the state and had also supported the war (81–90). Such ambivalence is also readable through the star imagery of Tanaka Kinuyo in Ozu’s *Hen in the Wind* (*Kaze no naka no medori*, 1948), wherein she is objectified and distanced in the eyes of a returning soldier husband and ultimately rendered “unknowable,” again juxtaposing the sufferings of housewives under wartime conditions with their “deviation” from the expected role of loyal wife. Coates suggests that mothers and housewives have been essential components of wartime ideology aimed at constructing a stable national identity; therefore, when Japan suffered

a traumatic defeat, they became implicated in the discrediting of the wartime regime. Moreover, the drastic changes brought on by a foreign power after 1945 lent “an unknowable aspect” to their actions and emotions (106–109). Her analyses of the images of schoolgirls and sex workers, anchored in the equally perceptive iconographic readings of Shindō Kaneto’s *Children of the Bomb* (*Genbaku no ko*, 1952), Kinoshita Keisuke’s *Carmen Comes Home* (*Karumen kokyō ni kaeru*, 1951), and other cinematic works, are also illuminating.

When Coates moves past the Tokyo Olympics into the mid-1960s and addresses such canonical works as Shindō Kaneto’s *Kuroneko* (*Yabu no naka no kuroneko*, 1968) and *Onibaba* (1964), I find her analyses somewhat less persuasive. She handles the iconographies of horror and supernatural in a more predictable fashion (in this regard, Yoshimoto Takaaki’s ahistorical invocation of “folklore,” which Coates draws upon, is not quite adequate for the purpose). For example, Shindō’s acknowledgment that the main character’s scar makeup was modeled after a Hiroshima bomb victim’s burn scar does not automatically make *Onibaba* a commentary on the experience of bombings. Likewise, I feel that the complexity of *Kuroneko*’s female iconography could have been better addressed, especially in comparison with the noticeably less abject presentation of the demonic-supernatural female in Mizoguchi’s *Tales of Ugetsu* (*Ugetsu monogatari*, 1953).

Coates’s analyses are ultimately most powerful when they are anchored in the “star” personages who had already had the chance to embed their images in the public consciousness in the prewar periods, as had Hara, Tanaka, and Takamine. I also feel that Coates’s attempt to expand the scope of films under analysis to include “B-movies” such as Ishii Teruo’s *Black Line* (*Kokusen chitai*, 1960) and *Sexy Line* (*Sekushī chitai*, 1961), while laudable, does not yield as many nuggets of insight as we could have expected. As the author ultimately acknowledges by identifying each film she discusses in depth in terms of its place in the prestigious *Kinema junpō* annual ranking, her analyses still center mostly on the critically canonized works.

Interestingly, Coates concludes her study on a rather ambivalent note, allowing that the repetitive cinematic icons under study here could function in a “conservative” way, providing an “attractively simple means by which to understand the world” that compartmentalizes the “rich interconnectedness of female experience and identity” and distracts viewers from effecting real social change, for example, actually improving the political position of Japanese women (204). Judging from her own analyses of the presentations of sexualized housewives, “immoral” sex

workers, and other abject women, I am not certain if this should be the only, or even primary, conclusion of her study.

Relatedly, I also wonder whether Coates should have relied less on theoretical works that tend to see women as metonymic representations of the “Japanese nation” or “community.” Granted, this view makes good sense in understanding the iconography of the immediate postwar periods, wherein the trauma of defeat and subjugation by a foreign enemy, coupled with the incomplete process of reckoning with war guilt and responsibility, was an abiding concern for the majority of cinema viewers, whether openly articulated or not. Yet, I might also point out that this sense of being together as “Japanese people” is itself a product of mobilization, socialization, and education (that is, ideological programming) and is by no means a “naturalized condition” for the Japanese in any period of their history (much less so in prewar Japan with its colonial empire extended throughout its half of the Pacific Rim region). Coates quotes at length Yoshimoto Takaaki, whose theory that the death of a woman in a work of art symbolically signals “the rebirth of the community or nation” (199). Would it be too truculent on my part to suggest that such critics, scholars, and theorists keep prioritizing “the nation” and “the collective” when the subject is Japan (as if Americans or the British are less nationalistic and collectivist than the Japanese in their respective histories), and that relying on them could potentially obfuscate the “multiple registers” of cinematic imagery of women that Coates so eloquently defends in the body of her study?

Despite such minor gripes, I reiterate that Hori’s analyses and interpretations of the key visual/filmic texts are absolutely riveting and powerfully stimulating, compelling us to seek out the media works in question and reevaluate their meanings with our own eyes. Coates’s sweeping readings are also extremely impressive in their propensity to bring together interdisciplinary insights from sometimes surprising sources, raising some difficult questions about how we have hitherto treated with complacency (and substantively ignored) the centrality of women in postwar Japanese cinema. With these new publications, these two scholars have made significant contributions to advancing our understanding of wartime and immediate postwar Japanese culture. Their books should be considered must-reads for any serious student of twentieth-century Japanese cinema and popular culture.

*Kyu Hyun Kim is Associate Professor of History at the University of California, Davis. He is also on the editorial board of Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review.*

### **References**

- Dyer, Richard. 2004. *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- Igarashi, Yoshikuni. 2016. *Homecomings: The Belated Return of Japan's Lost Soldiers*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Pennington, Lee K. 2015. *Casualties of History: Wounded Japanese Servicemen and the Second World War*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Ruoff, Kenneth J. 2010. *Imperial Japan at Its Zenith: The Wartime Celebration of the Empire's 2,600th Anniversary*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Satō Tadao, and Yoshida Chieko. 1975. *Nihon eiga joyushi* [A history of Japanese actresses]. Tokyo: Haga Shoten.
- Tansman, Alan, ed. 2009. *The Culture of Japanese Fascism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Uchiyama, Benjamin. 2013. "Carnival War: A Cultural History of Wartime Japan, 1937–1945." PhD diss., University of Southern California.
- Yoshimi Shun'ya. 2003. *Karuchuraru tōn: Bunka no seijigaku e* [The cultural turn: Toward a political science of culture]. Kyoto: Junbun Shoin.
- Yoshimi, Yoshiaki. 2016. *Grassroots Fascism: The War Experience of the Japanese People*. Translated by Ethan Mark. New York: Columbia University Press.