

# The Anti-Samurai Film

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From the outset, the Allied Occupation of Japan paid special attention to film. At the end of September 1945, just weeks after Japan's surrender and the start of the Occupation, its Civil Information and Education (CIE) section began pre-production censorship of Japanese films, and in November it promulgated a list of forbidden topics. According to this list, films would be banned if they

- 1 were infused with militarism;
- 2 showed revenge as a legitimate motive;
- 3 were nationalistic;
- 4 were chauvinistic and anti-foreign;
- 5 distorted historical facts;
- 6 favored racial or religious discrimination;
- 7 portrayed feudal loyalty or contempt of life as desirable and honorable;
- 8 approved of suicide, either directly or indirectly;
- 9 dealt with, or approved of, the subjugation or degradation of women;
- 10 depicted brutality, violence, or evil as triumphant;
- 11 were anti-democratic;
- 12 condoned the exploitation of children;
- 13 were at variance with the spirit or letter of the Potsdam Declaration or any SCAP [Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers] directive (CIE press release, November 19, 1945; adapted from Hirano 1992: 44–45; Japanese text in Shimizu 1994: 163).

Period films, *jidaigeki* in Japanese, merited special scrutiny. Understood as a repository of prohibited topics – including “feudal loyalty,” “revenge,” “violence,” and “militarism” – and associated particularly with “swordplay, intrigues and other objectionable elements,” they were all but banned until the Occupation ended

in 1952 (Hirano 1992: 68, citing “CIE comment on the script of *The Sucker* [*Kobanzame*], July 12, 1948”). In the eyes of Occupation officials, period films were synonymous with samurai, and they glorified a history centered on the warrior class and its values: self-abnegation, honor, sacrifice, suicide, unquestioning obedience, violence. The task of remaking Japan into a peaceful, democratic society required that such influences be curtailed. Hence the Occupation censors hoped that period films could be remade so as to “emphasize common people,” and not the samurai masters and their martial spirit (Hirano 1992: 68, citing a comment on the synopsis of *Princess Sen’s Palace*, July 13, 1948).

In fact this account of the period film has the general consensus not just of Occupation-era censors, but of film criticism as well. The distinguished Japanese film critic Satō Tadao (1956), identifies period films as a preserve of “feudal” (*hōkenteki*) ideas and “premodern values.” Keiko McDonald (2006) glosses *jidaigeki* as “samurai action pictures” and names Inagaki Hiroshi’s *Samurai Trilogy* (Tōhō, 1954–1956) the “period film par excellence,” since it “offers every pleasure the genre is famous for – battles and duels, plots and counterplots, loyalty and betrayal.” In *The Japanese Period Film*, the most extensive discussion of such films in English, S. A. Thornton objects to the equation of period films with samurai films (“not all of the protagonists of all the films are samurai”: Thornton 2008: 14); nonetheless she identifies period films unequivocally with the Edo period (1603–1867), when the samurai class was dominant. As she describes it, the “iconography of the films set in the past” (6) is one peculiar to the Edo period; the clothing and hair styles, mores, culture, and social structures of the period of samurai dominance seemingly define the look, feel, and narrative possibilities of all Japanese films set in the past. Other critics take a somewhat more expansive view of what constitutes a period film. Tsutsui Kiyotada (2000: 129), for example, acknowledges that the genre can encompass a greater range of historical periods, but he also notes that, in terms of numbers of films, period film is “overwhelmingly” Edo-centric; the century or so of warfare preceding the Edo period comes in a distant second. He accounts for this state of affairs by noting that material and other forms of culture link modern Japan with Edo and the sixteenth century, but not with earlier eras:

The arts that exemplify Japanese culture, from the tea ceremony to flower arranging, were products of this era. Likewise, the elements of daily life that we nowadays regard as particularly Japanese were all created during this era. These shared elements of cultural and material life make it easy for audiences to empathize with people of the sixteenth century and later. (Tsutsui 2000: 130–131)

It follows that period films, at least those that seek to connect with a popular audience, will be set in the period of samurai dominance.

In identifying period films with samurai society and culture, Occupation authorities and film critics alike have drawn, knowingly or not, on a historiographical

tradition that treats warriors as the key players. From the beginning of the Meiji period (1868–1912), when Japan was made newly conscious of western expectations about national history, historians sought to rewrite Japan's history so as to make it recognizably modern and to counter western assumptions about the passivity and "femininity" of oriental cultures. By resurrecting emperorship to symbolize its modernity, the Meiji state, however, created a quandary for national history. The portrait of the emperor that hung in every classroom and public office showed an imposing military figure; but the Meiji emperor's forerunners offered anything but models of prepossessing masculine vitality. The era with which the imperial court was most prominently associated – the Heian (794–1185) – was widely viewed as a time of ostentation and luxury, the era of Lady Murasaki and the *Tale of Genji*. It was a time during which, in the words of Meiji literary historians, "Japanese men entirely lost their masculinity; in both body and mind they became effeminate" (Mikami and Takatsu 1890, Vol. 1: 201–202). The preceding Nara period (710–794) was hardly better: its rulers were seen as mere mimics of Chinese fashions and scarcely Japanese at all. In fact, to find properly manly and martial emperors, one had to delve into legend. If this was a solution pursued quite commonly in elementary and middle-school history textbooks, which devoted considerable space to the conquests and military exploits of Japan's legendary first emperors, professional historians were more reluctant to lend credence to such myths and legends.

Instead, historians looked to the Middle Ages and to the samurai leaders of the Meiji Restoration to locate men who propelled Japanese history forward at critical junctures. To identify an active force in Japanese history (to identify, in fact, Japanese history as History, which requires movement and progress), historians turned to Japan's Middle Ages and to a succession of warrior heroes. In Kiyomori, Yoritomo, and Yasutoki at the beginning of the medieval era and in Nobunaga, Hideyoshi, and Ieyasu at its end, historians found figures who exemplified exactly the sort of virtues they wished to bestow upon the modern Japanese polity. In between were warriors such as Kusunoki Masashige, whose defense of Emperor Godaigo in the fourteenth century made him a classical exemplar of courage, loyalty, and devotion. Here were tough, robust leaders of men who neither indulged in effeminate pursuits nor dissipated themselves in foreign fashions. The Restoration era, likewise, yielded a corps of samurai who could be seen as the movers of history. Yoshida Shōin, Sakamoto Ryōma, and other young "men of high purpose" (*shishi*) placed the emperor at the center of political debate; anti-foreign and anti-Tokugawa at the same time, they struggled for the new Japan that might emerge once the nation was freed from foreign domination and the emperor was released from the chains in which the Tokugawa regime had bound him. The radical movement sputtered out, but other samurai picked up its momentum and (on this understanding of history) led Japan forward to modernity. Significantly, too, at this point the progressive force represented by these samurai joined with the Japanese emperorship, producing the modern nation-state.

Meiji-era political history made the modern emperorship of Japan, and by extension the nation itself, heir to the accomplishments of a succession of samurai. Since history showed samurai to be the prime shapers of Japanese history, it should come as little wonder then that the period film has been similarly identified with the samurai. Although Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto (2000: 240–241) argues that the samurai character of period film owes more to the popularity of certain kinds of literature and theatre, which come from the late 1910s and early 1920s – theatrical renditions of immensely popular novels featuring swordsmen were remade as films, inaugurating the *jidaigeki* genre – it has become commonplace in film criticism to equate the two, in other words to regard samurai as the natural leading men of films about Japanese history. To be sure, the content of almost all *jidaigeki* centers on samurai, while flashy sword-fighting scenes seem to be a required feature; the setting is almost always the Edo period, when both law and ideology stressed for samurai the kinds of values that Occupation authorities found objectionable. The identification of period films with samurai rests on more than content.

Against this samurai-centered vision of the Japanese past, I would like to attend to a number of films that take issue with it. Mizoguchi Kenji's *New Tales of the Taira Clan* (*Shin Heike monogatari*; Daiei Film, 1955), Imamura Shōhei's *Eijanaika* (Shōchiku Company, 1981), and Miyazaki Hayao's *Princess Mononoke* (*Mononoke hime*; Studio Ghibli, 1997) do not merely demonstrate that it is possible to have a period film that does not feature samurai. These films do more: they rework the histories that cast the martial tradition as the distinguishing feature of Japanese history. These are not just non-samurai films but anti-samurai films, which actively contest a historiography linking national identity and agency with masculinity and militarism.

### *New Tales of the Taira Clan/Shin Heike monogatari* (1955)

Mizoguchi Kenji's remarkable *New Tales of the Taira Clan* takes as its subject Taira Kiyomori, one of the most famous warriors in Japanese history. The first warrior to break the civil aristocracy's stranglehold on high court rank and office, Kiyomori amassed unprecedented power from about 1160 until his death in 1181. At the peak of his success he deposed a reigning emperor and engineered the ascension of his own grandson to the imperial throne. Kiyomori's triumph was short-lived, and no warrior after Kiyomori sought to place his progeny on the throne. Kiyomori was nonetheless instrumental in paving the way for warriors to exercise political power; thus he inaugurated what Jien, his near contemporary, described as "the age of warriors" (Brown and Ishida 1979: 17). For these achievements, Kiyomori has enjoyed a decidedly mixed reputation. In *The Tale of Heike*, the medieval epic that narrates the rise and fall of the Taira clan, Kiyomori is depicted as an arrogant, vengeful upstart whose overwhelming ambition threatens to destroy the realm. More recent historians have seen him as a (still supremely ambitious and proud)

courtier/warrior – the first warrior to break into the ranks of the aristocracy and one who opened the way for later warriors, the Kamakura and Muromachi shoguns included, to lay claim to political power.

*New Tales of the Taira Clan* is in effect a biopic, depicting Kiyomori's growth, over a few crucial years in the late 1130s, from a naïve young man into a warrior-leader and a harbinger of a new era. His tale would therefore seem to offer ideal material for samurai film, a celebration of warrior values and warriors' importance in Japanese history. Yet, while focusing on an archetypal warrior, Mizoguchi manages to subvert the stereotype. He offers Kiyomori as an example of an anti-samurai, and the new history we find in these *New Tales* proposes a different subject and motive force for Japanese history. Instead of the samurai, lords, vassals, and all the other trappings of feudal society, Kiyomori represents the common man, the forces of the marketplace, and an open, egalitarian society.

Mizoguchi's 1955 film registers how, in the decade following World War II, Japanese culture seems for a brief period to have entertained an alternative Kiyomori. Yoshikawa Eiji, the prolific and immensely popular author of historical fiction, began a *New Tale of the Heike* (*Shin Heike monogatari*) in 1950. Issued in weekly installments in the *Asahi Weekly*, Yoshikawa's version of Kiyomori's life proved extremely popular, driving the magazine's circulation from 130,000 to over 1 million by the time the last installment appeared in 1957. A fictionalized biography of Kiyomori, the novel takes a sympathetic stance toward its hero. Yoshikawa's Kiyomori is not a vainglorious tyrant who mocked and insulted the court and the religious establishment. He makes his debut in the novel as a 20-year-old, and his battles are those of an ambitious youth against an antiquated, corrupt establishment. Yoshikawa originally thought to begin the novel with the defeat of the Taira at Dannoura, feeling that this might resonate with readers who had experienced Japan's defeat. But, as he worked on the story, he found himself drawn to the young Kiyomori and to a revisionist project. "The established view of Kiyomori found in old textbooks was stubbornly entrenched; I struggled mightily to correct it," Yoshikawa declares in his diary. "Writing about the young Kiyomori was like writing about my own youth. I felt renewed" (Yoshikawa, quoted in Matsumoto 2000: 241–242). Accordingly, Yoshikawa's *New Tale of the Heike* highlights a young and hopeful Kiyomori, who strives to make his place in a realm ruled by greedy monks and supercilious aristocrats.

Based on early episodes in Yoshikawa's saga, Mizoguchi's film depicts Kiyomori as a new man for a new age. After a series of titles informing viewers that Japan in the twelfth century faced a "national economic crisis" precipitated by the rapacious behavior of certain parts of the aristocracy and the religious establishment, the film proper opens in a marketplace. Merchants urge customers to "buy now," because war is imminent and goods will be scarce and dear; other people frequenting the market bemoan the lack of political stability and the economic uncertainty it brings; gossips denounce the culprits – mercenary monks, venal officials, sycophantic courtiers – responsible for the economic and political

mess. Suddenly the crowd surges forward, spilling onto an adjacent road, and the camera pans with them, to show us a line of exhausted but excited troops returning from a successful campaign – one designed to suppress pirates in the western part of the Inland Sea. Tadamori, Kiyomori's father, and then Kiyomori himself move into focus. The camera lingers on Kiyomori (played by Ichikawa Raizō, a kabuki actor); titles inform us that Kiyomori is just 17 and is returning from his first military campaign.

The grumblings of the crowd gathered in the market signal the humiliations that Kiyomori and Tadamori soon meet. First, the warrior monks of Mt. Hiei, swaggering into town with their sacred palanquins, force the Taira troops to abase themselves at the side of the road; swinging their naginata (a kind of halberd), the monks threaten to behead anyone who does not bow to the deities enshrined in their palanquins. In the next scene Tadamori and Kiyomori are humiliated by court officials, who refuse to grant them an audience with their patron, the retired emperor, and deny them the rewards that are their due. Finally, the humiliation is brought home when, in Kiyomori's presence, Tadamori's own spouse – a Fujiwara woman – berates her husband for refusing to curry favor with the factions at court and for subjecting his family to poverty by failing to press his cause with the retired emperor.

The very forces identified in the opening titles (and by the marketplace gossips) as precipitating a national economic crisis are thus identified as the personal tormentors of the Taira. Over the course of the film, Kiyomori will confront and vanquish them; this culminates in a grand scene, in which he puts hundreds of Hiei monks to rout by skewering, with a single, well-placed arrow, the mirror that embodies their deity. The classical interpretation of Kiyomori's character in the *Tale of Heike* deems this act to be the crime of an impious traitor with his eye on the throne; in the film, it becomes instead a beautifully calculated blow against oppression, shattering the illusions that have allowed a rogue cult to lord it over the rest of society.

The marketplace plays a striking role in forming the new Kiyomori. A number of significant scenes, including the opening of the film, are set there. Kiyomori himself is identified with this market; it is a place in which, so he tells a friend, he feels "at home." The murderers, thieves, and swindlers who frequent the market are to him more honest specimens of humanity than the conniving aristocrats or monks who use holy relics to their own economic and political gain. And the ease he feels in the marketplace contrasts with the distinct discomfort he experiences at court – or in the presence of his mother, an aristocratic lady. Kiyomori's association with the marketplace marks him as a man of the people, an opponent of privilege, and a champion of those who must work for a living.

It is also in the marketplace that Kiyomori finds a mentor. A merchant named Banboku, possibly Chinese or Korean, seeks out Kiyomori and ushers him into his shop, which is filled with rare works of art, luxury goods of all kinds, and hoards of cash. Team up with me, Banboku proposes, and I'll make you rich. The ties

you and your father forged with the pirates (whom the Taira have just defeated as the film opens) will give you control over trade on the inland sea; with my guidance you can parlay this into wealth and power. So Kiyomori teams up with the entrepreneur and, as Banboku predicted, he becomes wealthy and therefore able to stand up to the monks and to ignore the slights that courtiers continue to direct his way.

Banboku is not merely a financial advisor; he is instrumental in Kiyomori's political awakening as well. As he makes Kiyomori rich, Banboku also schools him in the art of realizing his ambitions. In one scene, Banboku remarks that the age of warriors is at hand – and Kiyomori takes this message to heart. In the film's closing scene we see Kiyomori and his retinue looking down (from a hill) onto on a group of aristocrats who disport themselves on a picnic. When their guards approach to shoo the warriors away, Kiyomori calmly indicates that he will acquiesce (earlier in the film, he would have been livid), but not before having the last line. The camera captures him from below, in a 3/4 shot against a background of open sky (suggesting limitless possibility), as he declares: "You aristocrats! Dance as much as you'd like, but you have no future here. Tomorrow will be ours."

This declaration resonates strongly with certain strains of postwar scholarship. Since Japan's defeat in 1945 made possible a fresh confrontation with the emperor system and the kinds of history-writing that supported it, Marxist historians like Ishimoda Shō turned to the medieval period as a source of inspiration for a new age. Their histories characterized the rise of warriors – Kiyomori stands at the head of that process – as the rise of a revolutionary class whose interests, desires, even mores set them at odds with the higher nobility that dominated the "old order." Just as medieval warriors had spearheaded the defeat of a degenerate aristocratic regime, democratic revolutionaries in the present day might create a new Japan out of the wreckage of the old imperial state.

Mizoguchi's film offers a remarkably inventive reimagining of this historical paradigm. He retains the emphasis on warriors as historical actors but rewrites their meaning. Kiyomori is a warrior, but in the film he stands in contrast to others who wield force: the warrior monks, who exploit force to achieve selfish ends; or his own father, who selflessly adheres to an ideal of honor and service and loyalty to his masters – even when they do nothing but disparage him. By failing to be the representative of a class, Mizoguchi's Kiyomori departs from the historical role imagined for warriors by postwar historians. He may be a leader and a warrior, but his sympathies clearly lie with the people thronging the marketplace. The group he speaks for when he claims "tomorrow will be ours" is the common people, not a feudal warrior aristocracy. He seeks to replace the corrupt aristocratic regime with a robustly commercial warrior government that will serve the people. He does so, moreover, without impugning the imperial line, for the emperor and retired emperor are both shown to be allies. (The structure of the court, however, makes it difficult for them, the reigning emperor especially, to bypass the courtiers who intervene between the monarch and his

people.) The 1955 film offers a vision of warriors attuned to the specificities of its moment. The partnership between an entrepreneur and an imperial servant seems fitting for a Japan that had just emerged from Occupation, saddled with a warrior heritage and an imperial institution, both of which needed rewriting. Mizoguchi's film reworks the samurai film so that warriors become advocates of anti-feudal values and models for a democratic Japan. Kiyomori stands for the hardworking commoners who will build a new society founded not on hereditary privilege, but on individual initiative and economic competition.

### *Eijanaika* (1981)

Featuring a revenge narrative, a double suicide, young girls indentured to brothel owners, and other prohibited topics, *Eijanaika* would certainly have run afoul of the censors had it been produced three decades earlier. In other respects, however, Imamura's film seems a perfect response to the Occupation's call for films that focus on the "common people." *Eijanaika* takes its name from one of the most puzzling episodes in the history of the Meiji Restoration. From the fall of 1867 through to the early spring of the following year, commoners throughout Japan took to the streets, in frenzied celebrations. Beginning near Nagoya and spreading out from there, most of Japan's major cities, from Hiroshima in the west to Edo in the east, were visited by dancing crowds whose songs were punctuated by the refrain *eijanaika*: "Why not? What the hell!" Imamura takes these dancing crowds as an opportunity to rethink the closing days of the Tokugawa Shogunate and the Meiji Restoration that follows.

Though it is not hard to tell what happened, historians have had a great deal of trouble determining what it all meant. The crowds sometimes chanted political slogans and called for "world renewal" (*yonaoshi*), yet the outbursts did not have clearly articulated political goals, like tax relief or the dismissal of corrupt officials. Moreover, 1866 had been the year of political and economic crisis. Until the upheavals of the restoration at the very end of the year, 1867 – the year of the outbursts – seemed to mark a return to normalcy: rice prices went down and the political situation stabilized. So it does not seem to have been political or economic distress that drove the crowds into the streets. The dancing, feasting, and cross-dressing identify *eijanaika* with village festivals; the call for world renewal, however, distinguishes *eijanaika* from ordinary festivals. Since the dancing was sparked off by charms that fell from the sky – pieces of paper with the name of a deity printed on them – some historians have aligned it with the mass pilgrimages to Ise Shrine, which erupted periodically during the Tokugawa period. But, again, *eijanaika* seemed to lack the direction of these pilgrimages: it had no clear objective like the Grand Shrine.

"What the hell!" seems too ambiguous a refrain to ground a history. As a result, mainstream histories tend to shy away from the dancing crowds. Even historians



of popular rebellion – those historians who are most inclined to allow the crowd to play a role in history – find *eijanaika* troublesome, perhaps because the evidence of class conflict is not strong enough, or perhaps because the crowds were simply too heterogeneous, too contradictory to be transformed into a coherent agent of history. *Eijanaika* the film takes up what, by and large, historians have let slip by: it proposes to tell the story of the individuals who made up these dancing crowds. To do this, Imamura offers an alternative history of the Restoration era. Shifting focus from “men of high purpose” to an assortment of characters whose lives have carried them to the lower end of the social scale, Imamura questions the role of samurai and great men in the Restoration (and in Japanese history generally).

Imamura’s effort to rework the hegemonic histories of the Restoration thus involves demoting the samurai from their accustomed leadership role and training our attention on a group of misfits. The protagonists of *Eijanaika* pointedly do not belong to any of the social categories so prominent in period films. The film’s central characters, Genji and Ine, are, both, exiles from village Japan. Six years before the film’s opening Genji was saved from the shipwreck of a coastal freighter by an American ship. In 1866 he returns to Japan as a naturalized American citizen. His efforts to take up the life he left behind prove utterly fruitless. In the course of the film he comes to own land in his native village: the villagers, however, expel him from the community. They insist to Genji that he is really an American and that they “don’t want Americans working our land.” Ine, the wife he left behind, has in his absence been sold into prostitution by her father and brother. When Genji finds her, she is performing in a tent-show in Ryōgoku, Edo’s riverside pleasure ground, which invites the audience to “Tickle the Goddess.”

Samurai are certainly present in the film, but they do not occupy the foreground. Their signature swords and martial swagger are shelved. They figure instead as back-room wheelers and dealers, entrepreneurs interested in turning a profit from a variety of schemes, including selling surplus Civil War-era rifles to the Shogunate and opening a western-style restaurant that serves roast beef and wine. The film follows one samurai, Furukawa, whose fall – an infatuation with a courtesan leads to his ruin and eventually prompts a double suicide – is a kabuki set piece. Far from inspiring admiration or pity, Furukawa’s samurai values are deemed incomprehensible to ordinary people: “samurai are samurai; nobody knows why they do the things they do,” Genji explains at one point.

Imamura had a reputation as a “people’s director,” a champion of the down-trodden; he was known for portraying the poor and dispossessed as possessing strength and a lust for life. “If you want to take part in one of Imamura-san’s motion pictures, you must have a strong body and a tough mind” (Katori 2004: 38). This, according to one of Imamura’s regular leading men, is what distinguishes his films from those of other Japanese directors. And the physical strength and mental toughness are necessary because Imamura, in the words of the same actor, “has us grubbing in the dirt, portraying the lamentations of people living at the bottom of the social scale [ . . . ] [because] you need to be able to rebound from the

knock-out punches that keep coming your way” (39). In a famous quip, Imamura declared himself a “country farmer,” in contrast to Ōshima, whom he described as a “samurai” (Bock, 1978: 209). He is a director who abjures the formal, but also distanced, beauty and aesthetic perfection of better known Japanese directors like Kurosawa or Ozu, in order to focus on the messy, bawdy, violent, and vulgar – that is, Imamura would probably say, the most vibrant – aspects of human existence. Fittingly for someone who identifies with the lower end of the social scale, his favorite subjects are impoverished peasants, bar hostesses, pimps, prostitutes, pornographers, murderers, carnival hucksters – and he portrays them, lovingly, as greedy, lustful, vicious, deceitful, sometimes repellent, but always strong, always, in his own words, “really human [and] Japanese” (Quandt 1997: 5).

Yet another look reveals Imamura as more than simply a champion of the lower classes and a loving chronicler of their enduring spirit. As the list of his favorite subjects suggests, Imamura’s is an eccentric notion of “the people.” Where, one might ask, are the ordinary office workers and tradesmen whose lives Ozu, for example, chronicled in his films? In truth, Imamura’s people bear more than a passing resemblance to the class Marx labeled “the lumpenproletariat” – a class he described, with typical verve, as “the bribed tool of reactionary intrigue,” “the ‘dangerous class,’ the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society” (Marx and Engels, 1978: 482). Imamura takes a very different view of this group. According to Marx, the lumpenproletariat is a perverse twin of the real working class. And, while the proletariat is, in Marx’s view, the true agent of history, the historical course of its lumpen twin leads not to revolution, but “to brothels, to workhouses, and lunatic asylums, to the bar of justice, to the dungeon, and to the scaffold” (Marx 1924: 38). The lumpenproletariat marks the dead end of history. Yet these are the very people whom Imamura puts at the center of his films, the people he regards as embodying the essence of Japan.

Imamura places himself at odds with one of the historiographical traditions most concerned with putting “the people” center stage; he also sets himself against anthropological and folklore traditions – very strong in Japan – that identify “the people” with the rural masses, with villagers, and “country farmers.” The people on whom Imamura focuses his camera – sideshow hustlers, murderers, pimps, petty thieves, and the like – have persistently been exiled from definitions of “the people” propounded in these scholarly disciplines. By highlighting in his films a different cast of characters, Imamura provokes us to reflect on what we mean when we speak of “the people”; and he challenges us, most certainly in a historical film like *Eijanaika*, to include these people in our gaze, to think of pimps and prostitutes not simply as the detritus of history, but as its full-fledged agents. Of historians, especially, he asks: “How does one tell the story of a class that would seem the very definition of a historical dead end?”

In a series of conversations near the end of the film various characters raise the question of agency. In the first of these scenes we watch the carnival crew as they print up another batch of charms, to rain down on the crowd and keep

the *eijanaika* riot going. One of them asks the pertinent question: "I wonder who first scattered these charms?" Ine answers: "The gods scattered some and people scattered some. It's all mixed up." A little later, we see Genji and Ine together. Genji prophesies: "You know, it seems like the world is really going to change." To Ine's question about who's causing it, he answers: "I don't know, but I think it's the people." Soon thereafter, at the newly opened western-style restaurant, the elite conspirators against the shogunate wonder who started the disorders: "I don't know. We helped a little, but . . ." is the answer. Gods? people? samurai conspirators? – Imamura takes pains to remind us that the events chronicled in the film were of indeterminate authoring. Agency does not belong to the samurai conspirators, nor does it belong to the people or the gods; it must be thought of as something that is carried along by rumor, by chance – something that sometimes eludes human jurisdiction altogether.

Imamura's challenge to the period film thus moves beyond either recasting samurai as bit players or questioning the ways in which Japanese identity itself has been linked to that class. *Eijanaika* presents us with a complicated set of trajectories, none of which has the simple, assured, straightforward motion of a cause-and-effect narrative. The film is structured by a series of repetitions and reversals. Genji's attempts to return to Japan and to his village are equally thwarted; seeking to "return" to America, he has two fruitless interviews with the American consul. We get two virtually identical night-time robberies. Ine's show, "Tickle the Goddess," is recycled as the "World Renewal Can-Can from across the Seas." Genji plays the role of a Japanese Abraham Lincoln and engineers the emancipation of a young prostitute, but this merely enables the girl's father to sell her into prostitution for a second time.

The camerawork mirrors the narrative repetitions. For example, in a scene depicting a peasant attack on the compound of a rapacious silk merchant, the camera, tracking the peasants' progress laterally against the wall of the compound, repeatedly pulls ahead of the procession, necessitating a reversal that allows the rioters to catch up. What should be a scene in which the people move to confront their class enemies becomes instead a faintly comical stutter-step passage to nowhere. This is especially the case as the visual setup is repeated elsewhere in the film, to expressly comical ends: a group of men from Ryōgoku, on their way to commit a burglary, are seen moving laterally across the film frame silhouetted against the wall of the merchant's compound that they intend to rob. Moments later we catch the would-be robbers racing back in the opposite direction, when the explosive they set off in order to break in proves far too powerful.

Alongside these repetitions, the film highlights a series of thwarted narratives. Genji never returns to America. Throughout the film, Ine expresses her desire for change; in the end she is performing (nearly) the same show with which she started. Most controversially, the film features a people's movement that does not go anywhere. By conventional historical standards, this stalling would be a sign of the movement's failure; but the film does not support such a dismissive reading.

From the very opening of the film, before the titles even, Imamura announces that he seeks another kind of history. The opening sequence takes us through the Ryōgoku pleasure grounds. We become spectators to a series of freak shows – lady sumo wrestlers, a snake-eating woman who breathes fire, a monster-woman with a neck that telescopes out of her shoulders, a monster-man with eyes that pop out of his head. The camera does not linger long on any of these “monsters” but wanders rapidly through the tent shows, never allowing us to settle on one subject who might organize our point of view. Instead, innumerable figures move in all different directions, and it is never clear whom we ought to be following – or what indeed it is that we should be looking for as the camera moves through the throng.

The directionless nature of the throng does not mean, Imamura seems to be saying, that this throng falls outside of history. Instead *Eijanaika* calls out for history in a different mode. In the final minutes of the film, as the *eijanaika* dancing reaches its peak, we glimpse a kind of utopia, in which the heterogeneity and disorder of Imamura’s masses is of no moment, for they are not a people preparing for a rendezvous with destiny. Histories that demand completion – for example, a story of how a nation was brought into being – are themselves incomplete, Imamura suggests; for they leave out precisely those who – he insists – are most “human [and] Japanese.”

### *Princess Mononoke* (1997)

About half an hour into *Princess Mononoke*, the film’s hero, Prince Ashitaka, stumbles across something from a nightmare. Cursed by an affliction brought from the west (west here signifies not the West – Europe and America – but Kyoto and the imperial court), Ashitaka journeys westward, in search of a cure. In a beautiful montage sequence, he travels from the lush mountains, forests, and grasslands of his homeland to arrive at a realm where humanity is at war, with itself and with nature. His first encounter with this foreign realm is with samurai murdering villagers and razing their villages. Shortly thereafter he receives another disquieting introduction to civilization. As the camera carries our gaze up into the mountains, we witness a seemingly endless train of heavily laden pack animals and peasants crawling up a steep, narrow track. Smoke hangs in the air. The surrounding landscape is utterly desolate: the mountains are lifeless, the earth blackened by fire, the trees scarred, smoldering stumps. This landscape, we soon learn, has been created by the outcasts who labor in Lady Eboshi’s iron works. To get the fuel and iron sand essential for the operation, they must uproot the forest and quell its wild inhabitants. “When we’ve brought light into the forest and subdued the wolves,” Eboshi later tells Ashitaka, “then this will become the most prosperous place in the world.” Her Iron Town manufactures the implements to carry out this task – most notably the guns that give humans dominion over the forest and its dwellers.

*Princess Mononoke* might thus be understood as a cautionary tale about the perils of human interference with the environment and the necessity of balancing the needs of the natural world and the demands of human society. Lady Eboshi's dreams of prosperity place her squarely in conflict with the wolves, boars, apes, and other creatures who (like her) depend on the forest. The film therefore builds toward a climactic confrontation between Eboshi's gunmen and the guardians of the forest, who are led by the "wild child," San (Princess Mononoke), and Moro, the great wolf whom she regards as her mother. Ashitaka, an emissary from the remote northeast and a representative of a fragment of humanity (the Emishi) that has learned to live with the forest, frantically attempts to forestall the conflict and broker a peace; his efforts, though, are futile, and in the ensuing battle thousands of animals and hundreds of humans die spectacular deaths, of a kind only possible in anime. By refusing to take sides – say, to champion the wolves and condemn the ironmakers – the film adopts a somewhat more sophisticated stance than other films with an environmental theme. Yet far more interesting are the ways in which the film, as Susan Napier (2001: 177) suggests, "reenvisions the conventions of Japanese history." In the publicity material accompanying the film's release, Miyazaki (n.d.: 3) stresses the ways his story departs from conventional histories and historical films. "We tried," he writes,

to recreate the atmosphere of a time when Japan was thick with forests, when there were few people [...] and nature still existed in an untouched state. We used these settings to break free of the conventions, preconceptions, and prejudices of conventional historical drama. Recent studies in history, anthropology, and archaeology tell us that Japan has a far richer and more diverse history than is commonly known.

The film does not explicitly identify the time period in which it takes place (the opening title declares only "Long ago, this land was covered with forest [...]"), but the clothing, backgrounds, and other elements place it in the late Middle Ages, between 1480 and 1500, perhaps. This is an unusual choice for Japanese historical drama. As noted earlier, the reference point for almost all *jidaigeki* is Edo, and almost all revolve around the figure of the samurai. In a conversation with historian Amino Yoshihiko, Miyazaki expressed frustration with these limitations of the genre:

[Period films are] always just about samurai and peasants, occasionally the odd city dweller. They make history boring, I sometimes think. They take the interesting things out of our history. [...] In some ways, I think that [Kurosawa's] *Seven Samurai* was so very good that it cast a spell over Japanese historical film, and everybody fixated on samurai and peasants, on class struggle. (Miyazaki, quoted in Amino 2000b: 143, 147)

Of course, there is more to Miyazaki's choice of the Middle Ages as the setting for his drama than mere exasperation with the period film genre. According to Mitsuhiro

Yoshimoto, *jidaigeki* invokes Edo as an “idealized setting,” in which to work out the “strains and contradictions caused by the ongoing process of modernization.” It can do this, again according to Yoshimoto, because the Edo period belongs unambiguously to the modern side of the modern/premodern divide; as the source of Japan’s modernity, it is linked to the present by a continuous history. As Satō Tadao (n.d.: 39) notes, part of Edo’s appeal to filmmakers is its familiarity; continuities in material culture make it relatively easy to stage Edo-period dramas, while institutional and other similarities identify Edo firmly with modern Japan. In situating his drama on the premodern side of the divide, Miyazaki announces his intention to offer something different. Repeatedly during the making of the film, Miyazaki recalls, his staff grumbled: “But this isn’t Japan” (quoted in Amino 2000a: 144). This effect of estrangement seems to be precisely what Miyazaki had in mind. He seems concerned, that is, to reintroduce surprise and wonder into a history that, in his view, has become dull and one-dimensional.

Miyazaki’s attempt to re-enchant Japanese history is built around an unusual cast of characters. Samurai, farmers, and feudal lords, the stock characters of period film in Japan, play almost no part in *Princess Mononoke*. Instead, Miyazaki (n.d.: 3) focuses, in his own words, on “people who don’t have a place in the pageant of history.” The film features a diverse group of marginalized people. The film’s hero, Ashitaka, is an Emishi, one of the aboriginal inhabitants of northern Japan, thus not Japanese. San, the Princess Mononoke of the title, was raised by wolves and does not really consider herself human at all. Lady Eboshi’s name and dress suggest that she may once have been a *shirabyōshi* (a dancer/courtesan who performed in warrior’s costume), and the film’s producers give her an exotic back story with “international” elements: she was captured by pirates, taken to China, whence she somehow made her way back to Japan, bringing with her a knowledge of firearms. Her iron works harbor outcasts, women rescued from brothels, and a variety of laborers and artisans (charcoal makers, blacksmiths, teamsters – many, it should be noted, modeled after the drawings in medieval picture scrolls). The gunsmiths she employs are *hinin*, a group deemed to be ritually impure. The most unusual characters, however, are the *kami*, the “raging mountain gods,” who embody the forces of nature. The forest in *Princess Mononoke* is literally the realm of these *kami*; it is the sacred preserve of the Deer God (*shishigami*), defended by Moro, an ancient wolf-god, and Okotonushi, a monstrous boar. Part of Miyazaki’s re-enchantment of Japanese history is literal: gods and monsters are depicted as real historical actors. History, at least in the premodern era, takes shape as a primordial conflict between humanity and the gods – he seems to suggest.

Miyazaki adds weight to this alternative history by situating it in the Middle Ages and by manipulating certain attributes of the era. The film poses forest against factory. The forest – an enchanted realm inhabited by fearsome gods and, so we are told, “dangerous to human beings” – belongs to another, non-human world. The factory, a fully human creation, stands as an emblem of humanity’s increasing control over nature and productive processes in general; it is a sign of things to

come, when dark superstition has been banished (when, as Eboshi puts it, light has been let into the forest) and humanity has fully tamed nature and “exterminated the gods.” These oppositions are basic to our – Japanese and western – ideas of the Middle Ages. By definition falling in between, the medieval as a period opens itself to endless speculation about what precisely it mediates. Unlike, say, the “early modern,” whose name signals what is to come, the trajectory of the period we call “medieval” is not at all apparent. On the one hand, the Middle Ages have been identified in both Japan and the West as the cradle of modern institutions: the era, for example, in which a distinctive national culture developed. In this incarnation, the Middle Ages are part of a history of progress that culminates in the modern world. On the other hand, this period has long figured as a “dark age” of magic and superstition, of ignorance, violence, and insecurity: the antithesis of modern, rational society.

In pitting the iron works against the forest, Miyazaki skillfully exploits the tensions built into these ideas about the Middle Ages to develop another possibility. The iron works are associated with a notion of the Middle Ages as progressive, while Miyazaki’s depictions of the Emishi, the mountain gods, and the forest develop the “otherness” theme. Importantly, *Princess Mononoke* plays out these contradictions not simply to confront us with a ping-pong match between self and other, but to tease us with the idea that the Middle Ages harbored unrealized potential that is not captured by either configuration. The film draws on both lines of thinking about the era, to suggest that the Middle Ages were the point of departure for the modern and the last time when it might have been possible to choose a different course, to opt for something other than relentless, homogenizing modernity. The film’s depiction of the forest, in particular, seems calculated to inspire such a yearning for something other. Shown as a lush, verdant, Edenic space, alive with mystery and delight (in the form of *kodama*, giggling, mischievous sprites who guide Ashitaka through the forest) and just a hint of menace (the Deer God and other deities), the forest stands for all that will be lost in the drive to modernity.

The film tempts us to indulge in a kind of nostalgia for that which was not to be. We know that the rational, progressive strain wins out; we know that nature is tamed and the great beast-gods vanquished. If it is difficult to imagine, or even desire, a Japan still covered with forest inhabited by real, live raging gods, it is perhaps not so hard to imagine or yearn for one in which pockets of alterity still survive – like Ashitaka’s Emishi village, thriving 500 years after the Emishi supposedly ceased to exist. Situated at a moment that historical discourse has marked as a turning point, *Princess Mononoke* invites us to imagine a future different from that which came to be – one that did not see the complete conquest of the archipelago by “Japan” and the total disenchantment of the world.

Miyazaki’s sympathies clearly lie with this (im)possibility. By substituting guns for samurai swords and by casting the usual leading men of Japanese history as bit players, he seeks to open up the past and allow other notions of Japan to emerge.

Yet the film does not quite match these ambitions. While Miyazaki downplays the role that samurai gained in Japanese history, he transfers the attributes that define them – and that are commonly held to define Japan civilization’s distinctive character – to other characters, most notably Ashitaka. Though he is not Japanese, Ashitaka is otherwise everything that a samurai should be. His skill with the bow is second to none. He is loyal, proud, noble, self-sacrificing, and possesses all the other attributes that define the ideal warrior. Other characters such as San, the wolf-god Moro, and Lady Eboshi also conform in many ways to the samurai archetype. Martial prowess, honor, valor, and the like may simply be common attributes of actions heroes everywhere, but in the context of Japanese history they take on particular significance. Miyazaki’s history displaces the samurai, but it does not dispute the idea that something like a “warrior code” might still be a defining attribute of Japanese culture.

## Conclusion

The example of three films cannot, of course, succeed in counter-balancing the impressions left by the overwhelming number of films that celebrate the “samurai ethos.” Nor can they do much to overturn the belief that Japanese history derives its distinctive qualities from warrior society. What these films show instead is how the hegemony of this historiography might be disturbed; and they point toward a different kind of modernity from the one that Occupation authorities or the Japanese state sought to promote. The films adopt different strategies to takes issue with the historical vision encapsulated in the samurai film. And each suggests that an alternative history might have unfolded.

Miyazaki’s is in many ways the most straightforward. He imagines in effect a world without samurai or an imperial state. With the forces of the emperor routed at the close of the film, the outcasts who inhabit Lady Eboshi’s Iron Town are free to determine their own fates. They choose to do so in cooperation with the residents of the forest. *Princess Mononoke* points toward a future in which humanity and nature live in balance. Exemplifying this hopeful future, in the last scene, the mountains return to green and the forest begins to grow anew. San and Ashitaka, representatives of nature and humanity, are reconciled and resolve to work together, so that both Iron Town and the forest will thrive. Had Japanese chosen this path, the ending suggests, then modernity might have been different. The emphases of Japanese modernity – which have been economic growth, social homogeneity, imperial expansion – might instead have been environmental sustainability and tolerance of ethnic and cultural difference.

Mizoguchi’s take on the warrior class is more complex. He reinterprets the martial tradition in ways that would have perplexed Occupation censors. On the one hand, he takes as his subject the development of a military leader and the birth of the “age of the samurai” – just the sort of material that Occupation authorities



regarded as dangerous and expressly sought to eradicate. On the other hand, his Kiyomori is a different kind of warrior, at home in the marketplace and closer in spirit to the entrepreneur Banboku than to the status-obsessed, honor-bound swordsmen of typical samurai films. Moreover, in a conversation with Banboku, Kiyomori declares himself to be a firm believer in individual initiative. He has no intention of donning the yoke of honorable servitude but is determined to shape his own future: “My father is my father, but I am myself. I don’t want to depend on my father, and I’m sick of taking orders from the retired emperor. I want to live my own life.” The alternative future that might unfold once Kiyomori seizes power and launches the “age of warriors” is, paradoxically, one that the Occupation would have found congenial. Samurai might have become an entrepreneurial class, allied with commoners; they would stand as opponents of unearned privilege and as advocates of individual initiative. Rather than something that needed to be suppressed, the martial tradition might figure as the launching point of a modern Japan that is commercial, egalitarian, and individualistic.

*Eijanaika* does not so much propose an alternative history as call for an alternative way of reading and composing history. Imamura has little to say about samurai per se, except to show that they are as conniving and cowardly and self-indulgent as anyone else, and that the samurai-centered version of the Meiji Restoration and of the birth of the modern nation is incomplete. Significantly, and unlike Miyazaki and Mizoguchi, he turns away from counterfactual history. Imamura does not allow the carnivalesque atmosphere of the film’s penultimate scenes to last – in the end soldiers fire on the crowd, bringing the carnival to a violent close. He doesn’t allow us to entertain the fantasy that the world renewal (or national revival) was really at hand. But he does insist that history take account of such non-events, that it pay attention to dancing crowds and happenstance. The agency that Occupation censors, historians, and the makers of samurai films attribute to samurai is misplaced, he suggests. Modern Japan came about not through the actions of a coterie of samurai, but from the infinitely complex interactions of samurai, happenstance, and ordinary people out to enjoy themselves. In *Eijanaika*, as in *Princess Mononoke* and *New Tales of the Taira Clan*, the agents driving history are re-envisioned, so that the samurai are no longer synonymous with a cinematic engagement with the past.

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