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Citation

DAVIS, Richard M.(2019). Imaginary conquests: Folktales, film, and the Japanese empire in Asia. *Ex-Position*, 42, 5-27.

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Imaginary Conquests: Folktales, Film, and the Japanese Empire in Asia

Richard M. Davis

ABSTRACT

This article highlights three family-targeted films made under the wartime Japanese empire: Yamamoto Kajirō's musical comedy *Songokū* (1940) and Seo Mitsuyo's animated *Momotarō* films, *Sea Eagles* (1943) and *Divine Warriors of the Sea* (1945). Significantly, these films are based on two fantastical premodern stories—the Chinese novel *Journey to the West* and the Japanese *Momotarō* legend, respectively—whose quest narratives map onto Japan's contemporaneous military expansion into mainland China and the islands of the South Pacific. Despite the films' seeming alignment with ultranationalist ideology, I argue that the geopolitical trajectories of their narratives are rendered ambiguous by their various reception contexts, paratextual relations, spectatorial pleasures, and media modes. In the case of *Songokū*, the comedic, parodic stylings of its star, Enoken, proved an uncomfortable match with the already nativized *Journey to the West* story. This pairing generated a great deal of official hostility. The *Momotarō* films, conversely, were made with the explicit support of the Japanese Navy. I draw on Thomas Lamarre's work to argue that the hierarchy of beings (human, animal, demon) overlaid representationally on the Japanese, the South Pacific inhabitants, and the Euro-Americans is undercut by the varying degrees of plasmaticity in Seo's animated line.

KEYWORDS Japanese film, wartime cinema, animation, film musicals, folk tales, Enoken

Ex-position, Issue No. 42, December 2019 | National Taiwan University
DOI: 10.6153/EXP.201912_(42).0002

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Introduction

A long time ago, there lived a special man. Since birth, he had been blessed by the gods, and once he reached a certain age, he was given a quest. This quest would take him on a long journey. It would be perilous, of course, but he would not have to go alone. Along the way he would gather three animal companions. They would use their particular talents to aid him in times of trouble. After many hard miles and much conflict, the man would finally achieve his goal, and return home at last all the richer for it.

Thus schematically sketched, we have the Ming-era *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji*), one of the so-called Four Great Classic Novels in Chinese literary history, a deeply familiar, oft adapted story throughout East and Southeast Asia. It tells of the priest Tang Sanzang, based on the Tang-dynasty figure Xuanzang, who travels across the Asian continent to India seeking Buddhist sutras. He is joined first by the immortal monkey Sun Wukong, then pig-man Zhu Bajie, and finally Sha Wujing.¹ Coincidentally, this loose quest structure also describes the well-known Japanese folktale “Momotarō”: the story of the titular boy, found in a giant peach (*momo*), who once grown will cleanse far-off Demon’s Island of its monstrous inhabitants. He, too, is helped by three animals he meets along the way: a dog, a monkey, and a pheasant.

That these two folktales (or indeed any two folktales) resemble one another in their broadest outline is no great surprise, nor did it go unremarked in Japan.² What makes their connection worth discussing here is the fact that film adaptations of *Journey to the West* and *Momotarō* both played an important role in the film culture of Imperial Japan. The live-action version of the former, *Songokū* parts 1 and 2 (Yamamoto 1940), and Seo Mitsuyo’s animated adaptations of the latter, *Momotarō no umiwashi* (*Momotarō’s Sea Eagles*, 1943) and *Momotarō: Umi no shinpei* (*Momotarō’s Divine Warriors of the Sea*, 1945) effectively bookended the Pacific War.³ Even more critically, the quest narratives in two sets of films explicitly parallel Japan’s efforts to conquer and colonize mainland China and the

¹ Chinese and Japanese names are written surname first followed by given name(s). Sha Wujing’s animal characteristics are ambiguous in the novel but not, as we shall see, in some later adaptations.

² In the introduction to 1945’s “The Tongue-Cut Sparrow,” for instance, writer Dazai Osamu describes his failed efforts to write an updated version of *Momotarō* with animal companions drawing on the more complex character dynamics in *Journey to the West* (54). On transcultural structural parallels in folklore, see for example Toelken, *The Dynamics of Folklore* (1996).

³ *Songokū* is the Japanese pronunciation of Sun Wukong, aka “the monkey king.” This article treats *Songokū* as one film in two parts rather than two films. As was typical of the era, both parts were released simultaneously, played back-to-back, and together tell one continuous story.

territories of the so-called South Seas (here British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies), respectively. All of this is couched in kid-friendly spectacle, replete with funny talking animals, slapstick, and musical interludes—a far cry from the grim, thanophilic “popular” culture we often associate with the era.

At once seeking to create pleasure for the mass audience and to support, implicitly or explicitly, the Japanese imperial project, these films invite us to reconsider the junction of entertainment and propaganda. In this article, I argue that *Songokū* and the *Momotarō* films demonstrate that the use of entertainment forms to further state ideology is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, entertainment’s pleasures broadly conceal propaganda’s messaging, allowing it to recede into the background of narrative structure and character interaction and thus become normalized as their *a priori* conditions of possibility. Japan did, in fact, attempt a more straightforwardly didactic version of film propaganda in the early-mid 1930s, with “documentaries” like the notorious *Hijōji Nippon* (*Crisis-Time Japan*, 1933) consisting of little more than patriotic harangues delivered in direct address by the military brass. Once it became clear, however, that these films were “highly unpopular with audiences,” the state turned its attention and resources to more conventionally entertaining genres (High 48). For instance, the Imperial Navy’s mega-production *War at Sea: Hawai’i to Malaya* (1942)—a battlefield spectacular explicitly celebrating the one-year anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attack—proved to be one of the period’s most popular films.

On the other hand, entertainment’s pleasures are never fully contained within their films: they have a tendency to open for their active viewers transcultural linkages that may, in fact, reveal state ideology as contingent. Specifically, the premodern fantastical tales underpinning *Songokū* and the *Momotarō* films cast the geopolitical orientation(s) of the Japanese empire itself into relief. As mentioned, the films rewrite their source texts’ quest narratives as allegories of Japan’s ongoing colonial expansion. This happens somewhat indirectly in *Songokū*, as Sanzang’s holy quest to India is overlaid with signifiers of the Imperial Army’s push into continental China. In the *Momotarō* films, particularly *Divine Warriors of the Sea*, Momotarō’s forces are direct analogues of the Japanese Imperial Navy, and their attack on Demon’s Island makes explicit reference to earlier battles of the Pacific War. These films’ geographic trajectories become more complicated, however, when considered as mass cultural products within Japan’s heterogeneous, multi-ethnic empire.

This article contends that rather than simply operating along the axis of uneven power relations between Japan and Asia, metropole and colony, these films are better understood as participating in a global system of exchange—of both

capital and culture—that crucially includes the West, in particular the United States and its near-hegemonic mass media exports. This relationship, which scholars have visualized as an “asymmetrical totalizing triad” or an uneven “geopolitical incline,” has been central to the contestations of Japanese national identity since at least the late nineteenth century (Iwabuchi 7; Raine 9). I see both films as implicated in imperial Japan’s project to “overcome modernity”—that is, the creation of a new sociocultural formation in which modern technologies can be bound within and given spiritual meaning by autochthonous, “traditional” Japanese lifeways, outside of the Social Darwinist teleology that insisted that Japan was always already behind in the global race to progress (Harootyan 34). *Songokū* and the *Momotarō* films represent efforts to tell premodern stories in a modern media framework, governed by the Japan-centric moral universe which is encapsulated in one of the era’s best-known slogans, “the eight corners of the world under one roof.”⁴ The implied shifts in time and space—anachronism and delocalization—are key to the films’ ideological work as well as the potential gaps between that ideology and the spectatorial pleasures that surround it.

I agree with Peter High’s contention that, due to the totalizing efforts of the Japanese imperial state, particularly following the escalation of censorship and crackdown on dissent in the early to mid-1930s, “all forms of officially sanctioned public activity were de facto imbricated in the totalitarian system” (xxiv). Historians gain little by seeking complicity or resistance in any given industrially-produced, theatrically-released film text; this is all the more true for films made after the draconian Film Law of 1939. That said, however, being “imbricated in the totalitarian system” does not necessarily imply that a text is (state) propaganda, neither in the broad meaning of a deliberate “attempt to influence the public opinions of an audience through the transmission of ideas and values” nor in the common-sense meaning of a bad-faith effort to convince the public of an untruth in order to further state ends (Taylor 15).

Furukawa Takahisa stresses the importance of discursive and institutional contexts in determining whether a given film should be classified under the specifically Japanese propaganda form of the *kokusaku eiga* (nation-building film) (3). If a film has been certified a “citizen’s film” by the Information Ministry, for example, we might reasonably assume it to be a nation-building film; if, on the other hand, it has been heavily censored, labeled “unfit for general audiences” and

⁴ The phrase “eight corners of the world under one roof” (*hakkō ichiu*) comes from a text attributed to seventh-century B.C.E. Emperor Jimmu, the mythological founder of Japan. As used by the ultranationalists, *hakkō ichiu* became shorthand for Japan’s transhistorical destiny to encompass the entire world under its divinely-mandated rule.

snubbed by mainstream film critics, it is unlikely to be a nation-building film—regardless of its ostensible ideological content. This proves to be one of the chief distinctions between *Songokū* and the *Momotarō* films: the former was excoriated in the press, whereas the latter were directly sponsored by the Imperial Japanese Navy. Despite seeming parallels in the films’ narratives, affects, and geopolitical orientations, any analysis must weigh their similarities against the stark differences in their production and reception contexts. That said, my analysis here differs from Furukawa’s in that I do take the films’ formal and affective registers to be key components of any ideological critique mounted against them.

A second major distinction involves the two films’ “material orientations” (Lamarre 111). On the one hand, *Songokū* is a live-action film, in which premodern, exotic, and fantastical elements are represented through *mise-en-scène* (primarily décor and costuming) and special effects (masking, trick cuts, fast/slow motion, etc.). *Divine Warriors*, on the other hand, is fully animated, which has significant implications. For one, its premodern, exotic, and fantastical elements occupy the same ontological grounds as its contemporary, “realistic” elements;⁵ in animation there is no meaningful distinction between the filmic and the profilmic, and so there is never friction between photographic verisimilitude and the representational devices that supplement it. This suggests a deep affinity underlying the historical relationship between animation and speculative fiction, one that holds as true in Japan—where folk themes have inspired many animated films, starting at least as early as 1917—as in the rest of the world (Lopez 582). Conversely, the fantastical elements of *Songokū* are inflected most heavily by one particular paratext: that of its star, Enomoto Ken’ichi (Enoken), his film output through the 1930s, and his uniquely vexed relationship with the imperial Japanese state and its advocates in the media.

One final point of contrast needs to be drawn, namely, the tremendously altered material, social, legal, and psychological circumstances in Japan between *Songokū*’s November 1940 release and *Divine Warrior* in April 1945. It is well beyond the scope of this article to detail the tumultuous years of the Pacific War, but we might note that *Songokū* precedes the attack on Pearl Harbor by some thirteen months, whereas *Divine Warriors* came out less than four months before the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. By 1940 Japan had been at war with China for upwards of nine years; “total war” was declared in 1937 following the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, and along with it a “total mobilization” of Japanese society for the war effort. That said, the Japanese empire of 1940 was essentially limited to Korea,

⁵ With the notable exception of the historical shadow play, which we will discuss in detail.

Taiwan, “Manchukuo,” and wide (though hotly contested) swaths of coastal China. By 1945 Japan had conquered almost the entirety of Southeast Asia; it had subsequently been driven out of or neutralized in much of that territory, though of course Japanese citizens were not directly apprised of these losses. In May 1945, a month before *Divine Warriors* was released, Allied bombers burned Tokyo to the ground, resulting in some 100,000 civilian deaths. Needless to say, the populace did not have to be told that the war was going badly.

The remaining sections of this article detail the reception contexts and material orientations of *Songokū* and the *Momotarō* films, juxtaposed with close readings of their ideological and pleasurable textual effects. The first discusses the two primary “source texts” of *Songokū*: the novel *Journey to the West* and lead actor Enoken’s star image. Within the context of fraught debates over the course of Japanese modernity in the 1930s, I see Enoken’s parodic goals as participating in the much longer process by which *Journey to the West* was ahistoricized and nativized as Japanese. The second section turns to the *Songokū* film itself, examining the way in which relationships between image, music, and paratext further dislocate *Journey to the West*, ambiguously inscribing its place in the “asymmetrical totalizing triad” between Japan, China, and the US. In the third section, I analyze different modes of ethnic representation in the *Momotarō* films by contrasting animality with the malleability of the animated line. Finally, I return to the overarching quest narratives in the films and the pressure they put on Japan’s geopolitical orientation.

Enoken and the Contested Japanese Modern

If we are to believe certain postwar accounts, the film thus far called *Songokū* has a longer title: *Enoken no Songokū* (*Enoken’s Songokū*). Enoken, the comedian who plays the monkey king, is the film’s top-billed star. As the head of his own theater troupe and frequent collaborator with director Yamamoto Kajirō, he was one of the creative intelligences behind it as well. In the 1930s, Enoken’s name appeared on twenty-seven films by Toho, and its predecessor P. C. L. Enoken was in fact Toho Studio’s prime earner in these years; according to Studio Head Mori Iwao, he was nothing short of “box office gold” (Izaki 136). It makes sense that his name would be attached to *Songokū* as well, a fact borne out by Toho Studio’s official 1986 VHS release of *Enoken no Songokū*, thus far the only home video version available commercially.

This postwar title, however, is at odds with the historical record. Despite Enoken’s prominent role, and despite the long precedent of “Enoken” films,

Songokū did not bear his name in 1940, a fact borne out by both the extant film print and contemporaneous advertising materials.⁶ Though perhaps a minor historical discrepancy, the questions it raises—why was the name “changed” in the postwar? why wasn’t it “Enoken’s” to begin with?—help shed light on the film’s reception context and how that informs the ideological work, both actual and attempted. I take the Enoken star image to be key to understanding *Songokū*’s complex intersections of fantasy and reality, the premodern and modernity, and Japan, China, and the West.⁷ The fact is, the name “Enoken” itself had become politically suspect by 1940. Not only was it a contraction of the honest Japanese name Enomoto Ken’ichi, but it was written in the katakana syllabary, the same used for foreign loan words. In the late 1930s, a wave of nationalist xenophobia swept up jazz singer Dick Miné, comic actor Fujiwara Kamatari, and a host of others who were forced under threat of official censure to abandon the “disrespectful vocabulary” of their stage names and to revert to their birth names (Yamaguchi and Fujiwara 98). Perhaps in 1940, he and Toho recognized that *Songokū* was simply too commercially important to run the risk of nationalist interference and so left his name off the marquee. After 1941 “Enoken” would disappear entirely; he was exclusively credited as “Enomoto Ken’ichi” again, at least until after the war had ended.

The Enoken star image, moreover, was a deeply vexed one for the nationalist ideologues of the late 1930s. Having first risen to prominence in the “Asakusa Opera” scene in the 1920s, Enoken and his theatrical company—variously named Casino Follies, Pierre Brilliant, and Enoken Ichiza—specialized in an irreverent, parodic mode of comedy theater, one that blended slapstick, wordplay, popular songs (often with altered lyrics), erotic innuendo, and above all a kind of manic, self-consciously modern energy.⁸ Starting in 1934, with *Enoken no seishun suikoden* (*Enoken’s Youth Suikoden*, Yamamoto), this same energy would prove a big hit with the broader movie-going audience as well. *Youth Suikoden* is a college comedy, but Enoken’s *jidaigeiki* (period film) offerings like *Enoken no Kondō Isami* and *Enoken no Chakkiri Kinta* would prove his biggest hits of the interwar years.

⁶ The National Film Archive of Japan holds three of the original release prints. Examples of contemporaneous advertisements can be found in *Asahi Shimbun* 24 Oct. 1940: 4; and *Asahi Shimbun* 31 Oct. 1940: 8.

⁷ In Richard Dyer’s usage, a “star image” refers not to historical actor but to the discursive text constructed around them out of various media materials, including but not limited to the films they appear in (2-7).

⁸ Future Nobel Prize-winner Kawabata Yasunari inadvertently made the Casino Follies famous when he name-dropped them in his 1929 serialized novel *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*. On the Follies and the Asakusa scene more generally he writes: “Everything is flung out in the raw. Desires dance naked. All races, all classes, all jumbled together forming a bottomless, endless current, flowing day and night, no beginning, no end. Asakusa is alive. . . . Eroticism and nonsense and speed and comic-strip humor of current events, jazz songs and ladies’ legs . . .” (30-31; second ellipsis in orig.).

Within a production system largely segregated along the lines of period and contemporary settings, Enoken was the rare performer to successfully straddle both worlds.

The problem with Enoken was thus twofold. In films set in the present day, he merely represented a prominent example of what ideologues saw as Japan's "corruption" by the enticements of Western modernity and mass culture: its amoral focus on individualism and sensuality. When mainstream critics upbraided his films as the "dregs" of Hollywood entertainment, they called attention not only to their perceived lack of quality but also to their status as a secondhand imitation of an already suspect form (Murakami 107). Enoken's films set in the premodern past effectively added insult to injury. While ideologues like film critic Tsumura Hideo were calling for "history films" to ground the "fairy tale" quality of contemporaneous period films in a more reverential "realism," Enoken persisted in injecting his own modern hijinks into the Japanese past itself, often burlesquing venerated textbook figures like Kondō Isami and Sakamoto Ryōma (High 228). Put another way, one of the chief ideological functions of Japanese period films is to instantiate an "absolute point of historical disjunction," an irrevocably lost *before* posited as antithesis to the morally compromised *now* (Yoshimoto 210). Enoken's films troubled this distinction.

Journey to the West, then, must have represented an appealing third path for both Enoken and the profitable sub-industry surrounding him at Toho, including producer Takimura Kazuo and studio head Mori Iwao. Here was a story that would allow him to indulge in his usual anachronistic gags, but set at a safe remove from the sacrosanct Japanese past; moreover, its particular story—a band of travelers journey ever deeper into continental Asia in order to fulfill a sacred quest—was one that mirrored the trajectory and ideological justifications for imperial Japan's ongoing war of conquest in China. By turning *Journey to the West* into an Enoken musical comedy (sans the troubling "Enoken" in the title), the producers were hoping for a broad appeal: both to the mass audience which was already fond of Enoken's films and to the critics, educators, and other cultural gatekeepers who were not.

From a box-office perspective, this gamble paid off. *Songokū* was a huge success, probably the biggest hit of Enoken's career. On its debut, November 10, the Tokyo Nichigeki Theater reported its largest ever single day attendance: more than 20,000 tickets sold. The following day, it broke the Nichigeki's record again, and would unsurprisingly go on to be one of Toho's top earners for the year (Furukawa 148). Conversely, the response from Japanese officialdom was decidedly less enthusiastic. It is true that the film was not censored, nor was it labeled "unfit for

general audiences” (children under the age of fifteen), making it one of Enoken’s few general releases of the era; however, where critics deigned to review the film at all, they were scathing. *Asahi Shimbun* critic Q (the aforementioned Tsumura Hideo), probably the best-known film reviewer of his day, called *Songokū* an “idiotic, mirthless comedy,” an “epic of stupidity,” and argued that “the head of production, Mori [Iwao], should be held accountable for this insult to the Japanese film world” (5).

Ironically, some of Q’s vitriol may have been bound up in his ethnonationalist feelings about the sanctity of *Journey to the West* itself. This is ironic, of course, because *Journey to the West* is a deeply Chinese text, a classic Ming Dynasty novel that tells a fantastical version of events that transpired in the Tang Dynasty roughly 800 years earlier. But in another sense 1940’s *Songokū* is just another step (or, for Q, misstep) in the long historical process by which *Journey to the West* was nativized and domesticated as, essentially, Japanese. If one goal of the Japanese nationalists was to “overcome [Western] modernity,” we might think of this as a parallel, though much earlier, effort to overcome Sinocentrism: again, by selectively taking desired elements—in this case cultural, not technological—and first adapting them to, then containing them within, local sociopolitical formations.

For just one example of this process, consider the third of Tang Sanzang’s disciples, Sha Wujing, sometimes called “Sandy” in English translations. In *Journey to the West*, Sha Wujing is first encountered as a malevolent water demon haunting the Flowing Sands River, with “A head full of tousled and flame-like hair / A pair of bright, round eyes which shone like lamps / An indigo face, neither black nor green / An old dragon’s voice like thunderclap or drum” (Wu 422). Despite this visual description, however, to the Japanese a “water demon” would doubtless have conjured the very clear image of a *kappa*—a folkloric water monster, vaguely turtle-looking, with a flat dish-like head. Indeed, depictions of Sha Wujing as a *kappa* go back at least to Bakin Kyokutei’s “partial adaptation” *Konpira-bune Rishō no Tomozuna*, from circa 1830 (3). A century later, this cultural transposition was firmly etched in the Japanese popular imagination: *Songokū*’s Sha Wujing, played by Kanai Toshio, is a *kappa* as well.

Songokū is thus neither simply a (frivolous) literary adaptation, nor simply another Enoken star vehicle. It stands at a curious junction of these two paratexts: at once classical and popular, historical and contemporary, Japanese and Chinese. To be sure, part of its appeal for Enoken and Toho was its remove from the Japanese home islands; that Enoken’s Sun Wukong could follow the footsteps of the Imperial Army westward across the Asian continent was, doubtless, a bit of an ideological shield against criticism. As we move from paratext to text in the next

section, this apparently linear trajectory will grow more geopolitically complex.

The Sonic Geographies of *Songokū*

Ex-position
December
2019

One thing *Songokū* shares with all the named *Enoken* films is its privileging of spectacle over narrative. By drawing on the extremely familiar *Journey to the West* story, *Songokū* has a ready-made structure on which to string its sensational elements: musical numbers, special effects, slapstick comedy, and action scenes. In this section, I emphasize the first two of these elements as points of potential rupture: places where the straightforward quest narrative is complicated or even undercut by spectatorial pleasure and play. Looking at *Songokū*'s musical numbers and special effects, we find that the film text's admixture of Japanese, Chinese, "Asian," and finally American cultural signifiers belies any simple reading of the movie as appropriative Orientalism. *Songokū* reveals a rather more nuanced relationship to the uneven geopolitical forces that mold it and its audiences.

That said, *Songokū*'s very first scene in the court of Emperor Xuanzong seems to promise a rampantly Orientalist perspective. Following a deep drum blast, the scene opens on a close-up of a Chinese lion statue atop an urn, with the Emperor in the background; the camera then cranes up to a Busby Berkeley-esque geometrical configuration of dancers from high angle. The camera pulls back to a long shot showing us the entire court in dizzying motion—framed by two dark-skinned, turbaned palace guards—and finally cuts in again to the chief dancer, fans in hand and long sleeves flowing. This entire scene, which lasts for several minutes, sets up one of the film's most basic appeals: the spectacle of the exoticized continental other—coded often as a young, attractive, virginal woman—made available for voyeuristic consumption. A similar moment occurs later when the companions join a group of handmaidens at a desert oasis for a frenzied dance to the tune of "The Streets of Cairo, or the Poor Little Country Maid," a.k.a. the "Snake Charmer's Song"—doubtless the greatest sonic cliché of Orientalism in modern times. Here, the erotic spectacle is a double-edged sword, though. Not only does it bear the promise of sexual liaisons in wait, but in this case, it is also a trap; the handmaidens' queen has conspired to capture Tang Sanzang while his disciples are distracted. The Orientalized continent may be ripe for adventure, but its people are scarcely trustworthy. According to one intertitle, the biggest threats on the journey include "tigers, giant snakes, and bandits (*zoku*)," the last of which was the ubiquitous word used for anti-Japanese guerrillas by the press (High 33).

This is one of many ways *Songokū* overlays its fantastical/historical setting with contemporary markers of imperial expansion and mechanized warfare. Perhaps

the most dramatic update to *Journey to the West* is *Songokū*'s replacement of the monkey king's magic with industrial technologies: whereas in the Chinese original Sun Wukong can leap ten-thousand leagues through the clouds, here he simply transforms his iron staff into a Zero-type fighter plane, complete with monkey decal. Later, when outnumbered by the King of Monsters' evil retinue, he transforms his staff again into a machine gun, which he then uses to mow down bad guys by the dozen. It is worth remembering that this "magic," like the monk's divine quest, is blessed by Kannon (Guanyin) herself. Although Tang Sanzang will scold Sun Wukong for his violent ways, that violence is nevertheless coded as righteous within the film's moral economy. After all, who but demons would oppose a holy quest?

As a Toho production, *Songokū* features almost entirely Japanese actors, speaking almost exclusively Japanese. There are, however, a few prominent exceptions, none more glaring than the performance by the so-called *Shina Ningyō* ("China Doll"). Played by actress Wang Yang (on loan from the China Film Company, a majority Japanese-owned production house in Shanghai), she behaves much like the doll in a music box: wind her up and she sings and dances jerkily on the spot. Her song is in Mandarin and is not subtitled in the Japanese release; home island audiences would have presumably picked up on little to none of its semantic content. It would instead have served as a spectacle of pure difference, a beautiful young woman being physically forced to sing for our amusement—and doing so with a smile.

Wang Yang is not the only "Chinese" actress in *Songokū*. Alongside Enoken and Takamine Hideko, the film's top-billed performer is Ri Kōran (Li Xianglan). A rather infamous figure, Ri was born Yamaguchi Yoshiko to a family of Japanese settlers in Fushun, and due to her near-native bilingual abilities and classically-trained singing voice, she became something of the "Chinese" face of Japanese empire.⁹ In *Songokū*, however, her veiled "desert princess" character sings Japanese in a bluesy mode that contemporary audiences would have identified with *jazu* (jazz), imported from the US and quickly nativized. The signifiers here are almost too many to unpack: Japan's leading icon of "Chinese" femininity, veiled and surrounded by Moorish architecture, singing American blues in Japanese. Even more so than Wang Yang, Ri's ambiguous otherness yields up her face, voice, and

⁹ Earlier the same year, Ri starred in *China Nights* (*Fushimizu*), in which she plays a Chinese woman whose anti-Japanese sentiments are conquered by the love of—and, notoriously, a slap from—a "good" Japanese man, played by matinee icon Hasegawa Kazuo. This would prove one of the biggest hits of the wartime era; Ri became an overnight sensation. At her peak, in February 1941, more than 100,000 people turned up at the Tokyo Nichigeki Theater to see her solo act (High 275).

body as sites for transnational and transhistorical spectatorial pleasures.

There are many scenes like this in *Songoku*, when Euro-American intertexts momentarily rupture the spatial continuity of Japan-in-Continental-Asia. Most are even more pronounced, popular Western songs closely translated into Japanese—a practice known as *kaeuta*, or “altered song,” very popular in the 20s and 30s. In one early scene, when Zhu Bajie is still trying to hide his porcine nature, he accidentally slips from a love ballad into the chorus of “Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?”. When the disciples are riding on Songoku’s magical warplane, they sing a slightly modified version of “The Man on the Flying Trapeze.” Later, when the Golden and Silver Horned Kings dose them with “Opera Gas,” they perform a medley of highlights from *Rigoletto*, *The Merry Widow*, *Carmen*, *La Traviata*, *Faust*, and many others, on a diegetic stage decked out like a nineteenth-century European town. That this stage is located in the Horned Kings’ underground robot factory, itself filmed in the otherworldly geometrical spaces of the Oya Quarry in Tochigi, only highlights the many layers of decontextualization and delocalization at work here.

An even more provocative juxtaposition comes when the companions make camp in what turns out to be a magical forest. The audience discovers this after the travelers have gone to sleep; ominous drums sound over a close-up of their campfire dwindling to nothing, a trick of reverse photography. We then see a scene of large toadstools in the woods. The mushrooms begin to yawn, and a quick dissolve transforms them into women in vaguely toadstool-shaped hats, Dutch caps with triangular wings. The sound of their yawning meanwhile modulates into the melody of “When You Wish upon a Star,” the *Pinocchio* (1940) theme song; they sing and dance about the pleasures of singing and dancing in the forest at night, all from a static extreme-long shot. When Sun Wukong wakes in fright, they retract back into their toadstools. A little later in the sequence—following an encounter with a witch named “Anata” (“You”), her prosthetic nose very reminiscent of the *Wizard of Oz* (1939)—the companions are taken to a group of dwarf shoemakers (actually children in fake beards). Naturally their *kaeuta* derives from *Snow White’s* “Heigh Ho” (1937), with lyrics like “The woods at night echo with the sounds of hammers.” Those hammers have taken over from the pickaxes in the original as the percussion instrument driving the song’s rhythm.

Due first to restrictions and then ultimately the ban on foreign film exhibition, however, Japanese audiences saw neither *Snow White* nor *Pinocchio* (nor, for that matter, *The Wizard of Oz*) until well into the postwar, despite their global acclaim and the public’s “many loud calls” for a domestic release (“Aki made oazuke”). The songs thus preceded the films in Japan—*Snow White* was the first film whose soundtrack was made commercially available, on the Victor label—and it is likely

that Enoken, Yamamoto, and/or composer Suzuki Seiichi were able to privately screen the films through Toho Studio, which like all film studios was allowed to keep otherwise banned foreign films for competitive purposes.¹⁰ Used as *kaeuta* in *Songokū*, however, these songs reveal the gulf between what the audience wanted to see and what they were allowed to see, between the Technicolor feature-length full-animated cartoons being made in the US, and the rather modest and indifferently staged black-and-white live action versions that were made—that could be made—in Japan. The Disney songs resist the colonizing impulse that dominates both Chinese songs and cultural markers more generally in *Songokū*; they come from the other end of the geopolitical incline, and whatever pleasure they offered was surely offset by that awareness among the bulk of their audience.

***Momotarō* and the Disciplined Animated Body**

Songokū was hardly unique among Japanese films of its era in drawing on elements from Walt Disney productions. In the early 1930s, there was an absolute flood of American animation into Japan, starting with Mickey Mouse in *Steamboat Willie* (1931) and continuing with his competitors like Popeye, Felix the Cat, and Betty Boop. These animated shorts, a regular component of film programs, would prove hugely popular, so much so that Japanese comics (*manga*) and animation began drawing inspiration from or just directly copying Mickey's look (Ōtsuka 255).¹¹ By the mid-1930s Japanese animation was in full swing, producing dozens of short films featuring homegrown characters like Norakuro and Dankichi. Although precise exhibition figures are hard to come by, the mass culture of the era is full of references to both Japanese and American animation, suggesting that they both had a roughly equivalent cultural impact, even if not necessarily shown in equal proportions.¹²

¹⁰ Alternatively, they may have seen the films while doing location shooting in China, or possibly while on a goodwill performance tour there.

¹¹ Film programs were a standard exhibition practice through much of the twentieth-century that consisted of a bundle of shorter and longer films available for a single price. Typical film programs would include an animated short, a newsreel, a short serial, a feature film, and a second B-picture as well.

¹² Broadly speaking, film theaters in Japan were separated into two categories: those that showed Japanese films (*hōga*) and those that showed foreign, almost exclusively Western, films (*yōga*). The former outnumbered the latter by roughly two-to-one, though starting in 1938 this ratio would rise precipitously as various cultural and legal pressures kept foreign films out of the country and off the screens. Further, foreign movie theaters tended to be clustered in the big cities and attracted a more educated, middle-class clientele—even if, as Furukawa Takahisa suggests, some of those in the audience may have been “eating their cultural vegetables” while (secretly) preferring Japanese movies (20-21). That said, more archival research is needed to determine whether Japanese and foreign movie theaters exclusively showed animated shorts from their respective zones, or if they were mixed together.

Between the years 1938 and 1941, however, American film imports would be first limited, then halted altogether at the outset of the Pacific War. Alongside the expected cultural-nationalist motivation to curtail pernicious foreign influence, there was an economic reason for this shift: the government was strongly concerned about an import-export imbalance that resulted in several million yen being “leached” from the country each year (High 82). Regardless of reason, more and more stringent censorship regimes, particularly following the Nazi-inspired 1939 Film Law, resulted in fewer and fewer American films judged fit for public consumption. Walt Disney’s—and indeed the world’s—first fully-animated feature-length color film, *Snow White* (1937), appears to have been an early casualty of these policies. Although there is no single glaring ideological problem with the film, one suspects that it was precisely *Snow White*’s technological triumphs that led to its ban.¹³ In terms of the sophistication and complexity of its animation, the film was so far ahead of its global competitors as to virtually constitute a new medium.

Despite *Snow White*’s notable absence from the Japanese home islands, the Japanese film industry certainly took note of its phenomenal worldwide success. Not only was there potentially a lot of money to be made by producing a domestic animated feature, but, as Michael Baskett notes, by the late 1930s animation itself had become a serious topic in critical discourse, with intellectuals and government officials alike seeking to harness the power of these “modern myths” for nationalistic ends (50). Ultimately, it would take a collaboration between animation studio Geijutsu Eigasha and the Imperial Japanese Navy—in fierce competition with the Imperial Army for recruits—to realize something like nativized competition for Disney’s *Snow White*, not to mention its follow-ups *Pinocchio* (1940), *Fantasia* (1940), *Dumbo* (1941), and *Bambi* (1942). These were the two *Momotarō* films directed by Seo Mitsuyo, which were released in 1943 and 1945 after three-plus years in production. Postwar accounts often focus on the latter, *Momotarō’s Divine Warriors of the Sea*, as Japan’s first feature-length animated film, while neglecting the earlier and shorter *Momotarō’s Sea Eagles*. However, this emphasis on length—74 versus 36 minutes—ignores the strong stylistic and thematic continuities between the two films, which I examine as paired texts.

In their basic form, both *Momotarō* films recast the Edo period *Momotarō* folktale(s) into the present day. *Momotarō* is now a naval commander; the three animal companions of the original—dog, monkey, and pheasant—now constitute

¹³ A similar dynamic surrounded the lack of Japanese sound film production in the years 1927-1932, when the film industry and its critics generated a panicked discourse about the country’s technological “belatedness.” For more, see Davis, “Whose Blue Heaven?” (2017).

the semi-anthropomorphized crew of his air- and seacraft, alongside new additions like bears and especially rabbits, who are largely consigned to non-combat roles. Momotarō himself is the only figure in either film who codes as strictly human; his American and British opponents, folkloric demons (*oni*) in the original, are portrayed as human-like but with conventional demon horns and abjectly rubbery limbs—a point to which we will return momentarily. Finally, the original’s story of the cleansing of Demon Island (*Onigashima*) is mapped in the two films onto two very different phases of the Pacific War. In *Sea Eagles*, Demon Island is explicitly figured as Pearl Harbor, with the film recasting the Japanese surprise attack of December 7, 1941 in a comical mode.¹⁴ In *Divine Warriors*, Demon Island is a fictional location shown to be somewhere in the Indonesian archipelago (the Dutch East Indies prior to the Japanese conquest), though representationally it is a composite of signifiers for the “South Seas,” including Australia (kangaroos) and Singapore (Percival’s 1942 surrender to Yamashita).

Before going too far into the films’ representational content, it is worth bearing in mind Thomas Lamarre’s call for scholars of wartime animation (and beyond) to interrogate the “materiality of the medium” over its “politics of representation,” arguing that the latter fails to account for the instability of animated representations and their “actual experience and impact” on the audience (110). Lamarre emphasizes the fluidity and deformability of the line in character animation as it developed in America in the 1930s and was subsequently taken up in Japan. Sergei Eisenstein famously termed this quality the “plasmatic”: animation’s ever-changing forms, the infinite wellspring of life they imply, and the revolutionary potential they suggest in breaking the static, fixed, and seemingly timeless (10). Lamarre ties the plasmatic (a.k.a. plastic) to animation’s affinity for “nonhuman, humanoid, or animaloid characters”:

The force of the moving image is thus directed into [these characters] whose plasticity embodies that force, at once folding it into their bodies and releasing it. Needless to say, this is not a matter of representation. Plasticity does not represent the force of the mechanical succession of images. It affords an actual experience of it. The animal or animaloid characters summon and channel a technical force. As a consequence, a technical force is now experienced as an animal force, as vitality, as life itself. (114)

¹⁴ Its release was preceded some four months earlier by the aforementioned *War at Sea: Hawaii to Malaya* (1942). Not only was *War at Sea* also sponsored by the Imperial Navy, but it was directed by Yamamoto Kajirō, director of *Songokū* and Enoken’s long-term collaborator.

Differences in degree of plasticity/plasmaticness underline *Momotarō's* hierarchy of beings, with Momotarō himself simultaneously the most human and the least flexible, his outline solid, corporeal, and largely unchanging. His Japanese-animal underlings closely follow his example, with relatively little of the squash-and-stretch malleability that we see in, for instance, animal characters in the Disney shorts. Even when their animal characteristics are used for physical gags—for instance, an early moment in *Sea Eagles* when a rabbit performs semaphore with its long ears—their overall form is still largely maintained.

On the opposite end of the spectrum we find Momotarō and company's monstrous antagonists: the Americans at Pearl Harbor and the British in the South Seas. As mentioned, they are at once more recognizably human (i.e., not animalistic) than their Japanese counterparts, while also being clearly coded as "demons" via their horns. More than this, though, their bodies are profoundly plasmatic, given to abject deformation. This manifests somewhat differently in the two *Momotarō* films. In *Sea Eagles*, the Americans are largely portrayed as squat, bulbous figures, interchangeable except for one particularly blubbery, cowardly man whose appearance is unmistakably that of Bluto from the *Popeye* animated series, albeit a Bluto who is more fat than muscle. His tiny head sits atop a grotesquely long neck that can stretch out as far as either of his arms. When, in the middle of the assault, he pulls a beer out of his shirt and chugs it—a mocking riff on Popeye's spinach can—his throat pulses out like a snake eating an egg.¹⁵

By comparison, the British troops in *Divine Warriors* are spindly, rubbery things, their limbs seemingly boneless, constantly flapping around. Their faces, too, have a kind of sketchy quality that changes greatly from frame to frame. They give off the air of having been drawn by children. This is deliberate, of course, and has its greatest visual payoff in climactic scene of surrender, one explicitly modeled on General Percival's surrendering of Singapore to General Yamashita on January 15, 1942—a deeply iconic moment in the Japanese film culture of the day (High 367). Here we are presented with Momotarō and his retinue on one side of the negotiation table—calm and largely unmoving—set against the abject British/Demons on the other, who twitch nervously, fiddle their thumbs, stutter, and scrunch their rubbery faces in anxiety. Their efforts to stall and dissemble are ultimately unsuccessful, betrayed by their undisciplined bodies. The hierarchies of power and humanity are both amply clear.

¹⁵ Earlier, one of the monkey airmen enacts the same *Popeye* ritual of eating for strength. Here, though, he overwrites the American original by eating a *kibidango* (millet dumpling)—Momotarō's "payment" to his animal companions in the original folktale.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the death and destruction of these cowardly, dehumanized American and British forces is treated in the *Momotarō* films as both laudable and, often, comic. American seamen drown en masse in *Sea Eagles*, spilling out of a lifeboat like so many clowns out of a clown car—naturally, they try to flee rather than mount a defense. In *Divine Warriors*, our very first view of a British soldier is an extreme close-up on his screaming mouth as he’s tumbled out of a tank by a Japanese ambush; two quick cuts later, we see him graphically (though bloodlessly) bayoneted in the chest. In fact, this is a rather striking departure from the Japanese representational norm through most of the era: even in war movies, we rarely get a direct depiction of opposition forces. They tend to be off-screen or at most shown obliquely—silhouetted masses at night, say. Yet in the *Momotarō* films they are hyper-visible, rendered in extreme close-ups, in all their abject embodiment. Lamarre notes that “the elasticity associated with animated characters imparts a sense of their invulnerability and even immortality: they appear resilient and resistant to injury and death” (80). Paradoxically, this renders the animated enemy’s on-screen destruction more palatable, something less than bodily annihilation, simply one more deformation among many.

In between the two opposing camps of Japanese and Euro-Americans we find a third major representational category: the peoples of the South Seas, Japan’s “native” colonial subjects. Absent from *Sea Eagles*, these South Seas inhabitants figure prominently in *Divine Warriors*, especially in the film’s long second act when the Naval Construction Brigade is tasked with building an airfield from which to strike Demon Island. Here, they find a whole menagerie of indigenous animals—rhinos, hornbills, elephants, crocodiles, kangaroos, etc.—depicted in a maximally bestial fashion, with few human characteristics. One exception is a trio of Asiatic monkey species, including a Proboscis Monkey, who are shown as visually dissimilar from the humanly-proportioned Japanese macaques. With a single article of clothing each—the *songkok* cap common to Muslim males of the archipelago—and seemingly the only animals capable of native speech, they greet the arrival of Momotarō and his air force by singing, “They look a tiny bit like us . . . but just a tiny bit.” The suggestion, of course, is of similarity with hierarchical difference, precisely the underpinnings of pan-Asian ideology in the Japanese empire. The Japanese imperial project entices the other animals to “spontaneously” chip in to build the airfield: the tigers chop down trees; the rhinos pull up stumps; the squirrels hammer together the buildings. This sequence is similarly set to a song, although significantly not one that comes from the animal laborers themselves; sung in parts by a children’s choir, it seems rather to drift above them, ethereal. The lyrics speak of the “joy” of work and the “strength” inspired by Japan’s example.

Being animals, their natural state is one of physical exertion. There is no hint that they might be human subjects with desires beyond this instrumental role.

But the colonial project is not content to merely exploit these animals' labor. It requires interpellating them as well, forcing them to internalize the codes of the metropole via language. So, once the building is done, the animals must be gathered into an open-air classroom and taught the basic Japanese *katakana* syllabary. The dog-sailor-teacher begins by having the students repeat after him, and they do so adequately, but when it is time for them to actually match the sound to its syllable, they can only respond in their native, bestial cry or squawk or howl. Further, like unruly children they quickly lose interest and start wandering away from their desks, pranking one another. Only when another sailor pulls out a harmonica and starts playing the Japanese equivalent of "The Alphabet Song" do the South Sea animals first pick up on the rhythm (tapping hooves, swaying) and then the melody and words. Then when they have mastered the song, it resolves into a full-on musical number as the animals now perform domestic—rather than brute—labor for the Japanese, like doing laundry and preparing food. Interestingly, this quasi-civilizing transformation is carried out via what Rick Altman calls an "audio dissolve," a transitional passage between the diegetic and music tracks in the integrated musical film (63). Here, though, the audio dissolve does not smooth over the ontological break between "realistic" and musical passages, but rather between the different civilizational levels of the native animals. This suggests something of the ideological difficulties involved in incorporating the peoples of the southern Pacific into the Japanese imaginary.

Divine Warriors further distinguishes its imperial project in opposition to that of the European colonialists who conquered Demon Island in the distant past.¹⁶ Here, on the morning of the Japanese assault, the film unexpectedly breaks into a different media mode: a kind of limited animation mimicking the Balinese puppet theater. Character and object layers are done in flat silhouette; they move in a jerky fashion, as though hinged at the joints, and mostly along the horizontal plane. Rigid, they display none of the plasmaticity of the animated characters elsewhere. A voice-over narrator, unheard elsewhere in the film, recounts a tale of European merchants—pirates, in fact—who arrived long ago in their "black ships."¹⁷ In

¹⁶ Conversely, *Sea Eagles* neglects to touch on the colonial legacy of Hawaii. Though it plays "Aloha 'Oe" in the build-up to the Pearl Harbor attack, it uses it as a sonic cliché of "Hawaiianess"; the song's author, Hawaii's last deposed monarch, Lili'uokalani, would seem to suggest another anticolonial Pan-Asian linkage. That said, the spectacularly destructive attack in *Sea Eagles* is clearly not intended for anyone's liberation.

¹⁷ The same sobriquet is associated with Admiral Perry's fleet, which forcefully "opened" Japan to American and subsequently European trade starting in 1857. The historical link between these two Western incursions is thus made explicit to the Japanese-speaking audience.

short succession the pirates tell perfumed lies to the native king, betray their promises, and wage war on his “gentle” subjects. The natives lose to the European canons, but the scene closes on a prophecy: a mystical obelisk, deep in the jungle, that promises the island’s freedom will only be restored through the intervention of a “kingdom of angels” from the far north. Then a fade takes us back to the present day, and Japanese airmen in rows on the morning of the assault, their scarves flapping nobly in the dawn breeze. Though fully animated, they are, for the moment, visible simply as silhouettes.

So *Divine Warriors* comes full circle, inventing a South Seas folk legend that has effectively summoned a Japanese folk hero. By toggling between limited and full animation, the film can mark a distinction between the historical sins of the European powers and the current “liberatory” efforts of the Japanese, while also visually embedding the Japanese airmen within a mythic, transhistorical, Pan-Asian lineage. As we have seen, both *Momotarō* films use media modes to establish a clear hierarchy of beings, with the most human-like and most disciplined—i.e., least plasmatic—Japanese forces at the top. The native/animals of the South Seas, conversely, are undisciplined but receptive, narratively and pictographically, to having discipline imposed. Thus constructed, they are the perfect potential colonial subjects.

Conclusion: Geopolitical Afterlives

In this article, I have emphasized a certain narrative trajectory common to both *Songokū* and the *Momotarō* films: that is, geographical expansion outward from the Japanese home islands, westward and southward into first China and the Asian continent, then into Southeast Asia and the islands of the South Pacific. Though the expansion is figured as less explicitly military in *Songokū* than in *Momotarō*, it is in all cases righteous and divinely-ordained, drawing on a premodern folktale for both “historical” precedent and moral justification. Despite this seemingly straightforward ideological alignment with Japan’s imperial project, I have argued that various aspects of the films put pressure on their capacity to function as propaganda: their reception contexts, paratexts, media modes, and perhaps above all their ambiguous (and ambivalent) relationships to Western, particularly American, cultural signifiers. *Sea Eagles*, for instance, may be attempting to “overcome (Western) modernity” by killing a debased Bluto and replacing Popeye’s spinach with *kibidango*, but for this parody to work it requires an audience already intimately familiar with the tropes being remixed. The film points to and thus implicitly reinforces the hegemony of American mass culture even while trying to

undermine it.

The ending of *Divine Soldiers* even gestures at a literal, non-symbolic overcoming of America and the “asymmetrical totalizing triad” it supports. In the final scene, after the British/Demons have been subdued, the film returns once more to the bucolic Japanese hometown setting in which it began. Here we see the younger siblings of the heroic seamen engaged in military drills: practicing their dropping-and-rolling, racing up ladders, etc. At the very end of the rustic obstacle course, the children must perform a leap of faith: from high up in a tree down onto the ground, where there is a detailed chalk outline of North America. The little monkey brother—the most individuated of the children and the only to get a close-up—hesitates, momentarily afraid. But with encouragement from his rabbit friend, he screws up his courage, yells, and leaps. Mid-jump, the background din of screaming children disappears and is replaced by a sentimental, triumphant orchestral piece. The boy falls in slow-motion, smoothly lands and rolls, and then stands astride America, monumentalized in low angle. One final shot (also low angle) shows the children running off into the horizon, as the camera tilts up to incorporate them into the national body, metonymized by Mt. Fuji, the image on which the film fades out.

Obviously, over the course of *Divine Soldiers*' three-year production schedule, an actual physical invasion of the North American continent by Japanese paratroopers had gone from wishful thinking to plain absurdity. In May 1945, it was the Japanese home islands that were under imminent threat of invasion; any adult with the least bit of sense must have viewed this scene with bitter irony. Nevertheless, it is worth considering how *Divine Soldiers* might have been processed by its primary audience: the children and especially military recruitment-aged youths whose natural “affinity” to animation was a large part of the film's initial purpose. The surface pleasures offered by the film are many; in between the singing animals, communal exertions, and thrilling combat, the structures of Japan's expansionist geopolitics must have formed a “natural” backdrop. But would this ideological mapping have persisted into the postwar?

As a matter of fact, we have some evidence that it did. A fifteen-year-old boy named Tezuka Osamu saw *Divine Soldiers* in its original 1945 release, and wrote of it: “My first impression of the film was that it seemed to use elements of culture films [documentaries], and even though called a war film, it had in fact taken on a peaceful form. . . . My next impression was that cartoons had been very beautifully cinematized. . . . What is more, the storyline was clearer than anything before it; it was more like a documentary than a cartoon” (Ōtsuka 272). Tezuka would of course go on to become the most influential and revered *manga* artist of the

postwar period, a figure often referred to as the “god” of *manga*. Ōtsuka details how Tezuka’s own development as a young artist was influenced by the cinematic storytelling in *Divine Soldiers*, starting that same year with his short comic effort “Until the Day of Victory.” There is thus a direct historical through line between the aesthetics of the *Momotarō* films and those of the *manga/anime* industries today, collectively valued in excess of \$3 billion. Beyond style, though, Tezuka’s youthful comments on *Divine Soldiers*’ “peaceful form” and “documentary” qualities hint at a fundamental divide between animation’s content and the experience of it. Only with animation can a war film be made to feel peaceful and a talking animal cartoon made to feel “real.” And so it is in today’s *manga* and *anime*, where ethnonationalist themes are not only commonly hidden in plain sight but indeed exported to the rest of the world, to East Asia and North America in particular. The 2012 reboot of influential 70s series *Space Battleship Yamato*—named, of course, after the Imperial Navy’s flagship *Yamato*—offers but one recent example. How ironic that Japan’s military expansion failed but the cultural forms developed to encourage it persist in the *manga/anime* complex through which “cool Japan” generates much of its global soft power today.

And Enoken? Certainly, no amount of ideological work sufficed to warm the wartime bureaucrats over to Enoken’s side. His appearance in Kurosawa Akira’s *The Men Who Tread on the Tiger’s Tail* is a case in point. The film, produced in the closing months of the Pacific War but not finished until the American occupation was underway, has the curious distinction of being the only movie censored by the Home Ministry *after* Japan’s surrender. As with so much of Enoken’s 1930s output, *Tiger’s Tail* was a period film based on a Kabuki play (“Kanjichō”), itself based on an older Noh play. Apparently, the “act of mockery,” of putting modern comedian Enoken into this “traditional” cultural object, was simply too much for the censors to bear (Kurosawa 143). When the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) compelled the Home Ministry to compile a report on all films awaiting release in the industry, the censors deliberately “lost” the file on *Tiger’s Tail*—essentially their last act in power. The film was thus rendered “illegal” and unscreenable until its discovery and resuscitation years later by the head of the G.H.Q.’s film division. *Tiger’s Tail* finally had its premiere seven years later in April 1952, just days before the occupation’s official end.

But *Tiger’s Tail* aside, Enoken would go on to enjoy a successful comeback in the postwar, appearing in a total of 92 films between late 1945 and 1969, alongside many of the era’s typically optimistic, “democratic” stars like Misora Hibari and even his old Asakusa theatrical rival, Furukawa Roppa. In 1984, fourteen years after his death, a special *Kinema Junpo* poll ranked him the seventh greatest male

Japanese movie star of all time—the only comedian on the list (Izaki 10). Obviously, his wartime films did not terribly warp his star image in the eyes of the public; or, alternatively, his image proved ripe for postwar “reconstruction,” as did that of so many of his peers.¹⁸ He is largely remembered in precisely the way he always wanted to be remembered: as an “innocent clown,” a person “born loving to make everyone laugh” (Enomoto 1940).

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¹⁸ A prominent example is Hara Setsuko, beloved by cinephiles worldwide for her humanistic postwar work with Ozu Yasujiro. Less widely known is her initial rise to fame as the iconic “girl back home” in the wartime military spectacles: a kind of spiritist warrior of the home front, unwavering in her support for the national cause.

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**Manuscript received 1 May 2019,
accepted for publication 16 Oct. 2019

